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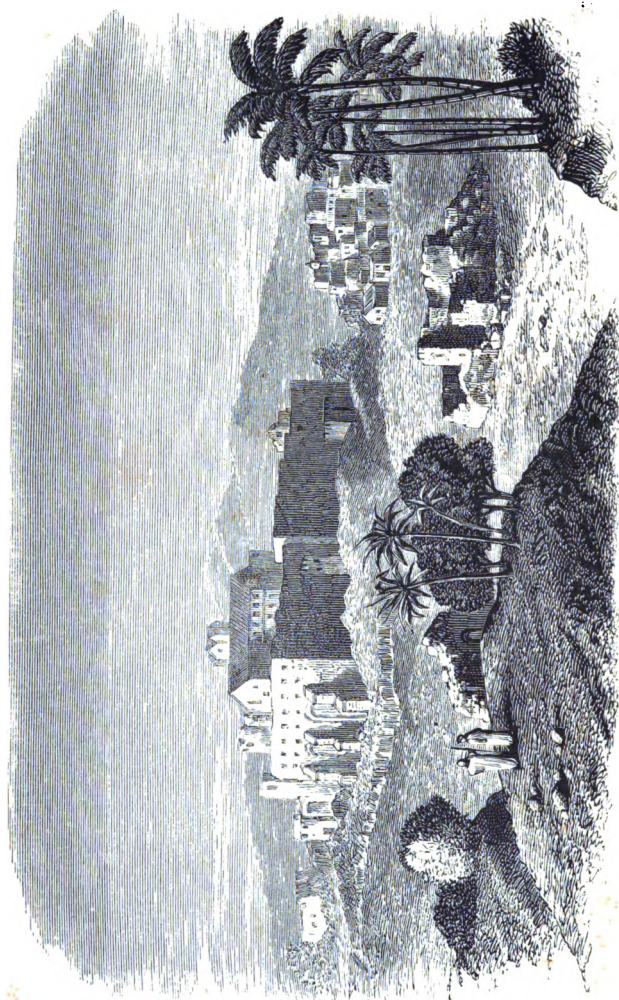




THE HOLY CHILD JESUS.



BETHLEHEM.



THE
HOLY CHILD JESUS;

OR,

THE EARLY LIFE OF CHRIST

VIEWED IN CONNECTION WITH

THE HISTORY, CHRONOLOGY, AND ARCHÆOLOGY
OF THE TIMES.

BY THE

REV. THORNLEY SMITH,

AUTHOR OF "THE HISTORY OF JOSEPH,"
ETC., ETC.



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"TO WRITE A HISTORY OF THE GREATEST LIFE THAT HAS BEEN MANIFESTED UPON THE EARTH—THAT LIFE IN WHICH THE DIVINE GLORY IRRADIATED EARTHLY EXISTENCE—IS INDEED THE GREATEST OF HUMAN TASKS. YET THE ATTEMPT IS NOT PRESUMPTUOUS IF IT BE MADE UPON THE GOSPEL BASIS: EVERY AGE WITNESSES NEW ATTEMPTS OF THE KIND. IT IS PART OF THE MEANS BY WHICH WE APPROPRIATE TO OURSELVES THIS HIGHEST LIFE; TO BECOME MORE AND MORE INTIMATE WITH IT; TO BRING IT NEARER AND NEARER TO OURSELVES."—NEANDER.

PREFACE.



LIVES of Jesus have become somewhat numerous. The admirable work of Neander, the great work of Lange, and the more recent work of M. de Pressensé have all appeared in English translations; and these, together with the Historical Lectures of Bishop Ellicott, furnish ample refutations of the sceptical productions of Baur, Strauss, and Renan, and have poured a flood of light on "the Great Biography," in which it is a joy to walk.

But I am not aware of the existence of any work which treats the early life of Jesus in the manner I have here attempted; and hence I indulge the hope that these pages will be acceptable, especially to intelligent young people who read the Scriptures with an earnest desire to understand them, and to profit by the lessons they unfold.

Attempts have been made to disprove the genuineness of the early portions of the Gospels of St. Matthew and St. Luke, and thus to get rid of the miraculous conception of our Lord. And, indeed, the object of scepticism now is to set aside everything miraculous in His history ; so that the Life of Jesus is becoming more and more the battle-ground on which the contest between truth and error is being waged. But we have no fear for the result. The foundations of our faith can never be destroyed. Yet it is necessary that every one should be on his guard, lest, by some side-blow, aimed, perhaps, by those whose position in the controversy is not sufficiently defined, his confidence in the great verities of religion should be temporarily shaken. If we reject the chapters referred to, we must, to be consistent, reject the two Gospels which contain them ; for there is the same evidence of their genuineness as of that of the other portions of those Gospels. And if there had been nothing miraculous in the birth of Christ, His whole life would have been a greater mystery than it is. His miraculous conception is implied in his sinlessness, which the writings of the New Testament repeatedly affirm ; and His sinlessness

itself is a miracle as great as any which the Evangelists record.

I had prepared a chapter on the genealogies, which, however, has been omitted; the subject being of but little interest except to scholars. My conviction is, as I have stated in the first chapter, that both the genealogies are Joseph's, the opinion that the one given by St. Luke is Mary's being of comparatively modern date. It is more than probable that both the lists were obtained from the archives of Jewish History preserved in the temple at Jerusalem; and it should be observed that St. Matthew's is divided into three portions, each portion containing fourteen generations. In reference to the omission of certain names, and some other difficulties connected with the subject, information will be found in the works referred to in the footnote of page 3.

This volume does not consist of sermons or lectures, as the reader will at once perceive. It has been in preparation for upwards of four years, during which period it has occupied my attention whenever I could command the necessary leisure. It is committed to the press with the earnest prayer that "the Father of lights"

may render it, in some measure, conducive to the interests of truth, and that it may please Him to preserve His Church from error, and to guide His people into the paths of righteousness and peace.

T. S.

JUNE, 1868.

ERRATUM.

Page 31 line 19, for B.C. 3, read B.C. 5.

CONTENTS.



	PAGE
PREFACE	vii
CHAPTER I.	
THE ANNUNCIATION OF THE BIETH OF THE HOLY CHILD	1
CHAPTER II.	
THE FORERUNNER OF THE HOLY CHILD	21
CHAPTER III.	
THE BIRTH-PLACE OF THE HOLY CHILD	43
CHAPTER IV.	
THE NATIVITY OF THE HOLY CHILD	61
CHAPTER V.	
THE SHEPHERDS OF BETHLEHEM AND THE HOLY CHILD	80
CHAPTER VI.	
THE PRESENTATION OF THE HOLY CHILD IN THE TEMPLE	100

CHAPTER VII.

PAGE

THE HOLY CHILD AND THE MAGI OF THE EAST .	119
---	-----

CHAPTER VIII.

THE HOLY CHILD IN EGYPT, AND THE SLAUGHTER OF THE INNOCENTS	137
--	-----

CHAPTER IX.

THE HOLY CHILD AT NAZARETH	157
--------------------------------------	-----

CHAPTER X.

THE HOLY CHILD WITH THE DOCTORS IN THE TEMPLE	175
--	-----

CHAPTER XI.

THE HOLY CHILD SUBJECT TO HIS PARENTS . . .	195
---	-----

CHAPTER XII.

THE PLACE IN HISTORY OF THE HOLY CHILD . .	216
--	-----

INDEX	228
-----------------	-----

CHAPTER I.



THE ANNUNCIATION OF THE BIRTH OF THE HOLY CHILD.

DIVINE Revelation informs us of the existence of an order of intelligences called angels, or messengers, who, having kept their "first estate," and maintained their fidelity to God, are frequently employed on the most important errands, and are "ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation." (Heb. i. 14.) Of these there seem to be different ranks,—“thrones, dominions, principalities, and powers;” (Col. i. 16;) but only two angels are mentioned in Scripture by name,—Michael the archangel, (Dan. xii. 1,) and Gabriel, the “hero of God.” (Dan. ix. 21.) Michael is supposed to be the representative of angelic powers contending with the enemies of God; Gabriel is the angel who administers comfort and consolation to man.*

* Some eminent writers maintain that Michael (*Who is like unto God?*) is the Lord Jesus Christ. A summary of the

When the prophet Daniel saw by the river Ulai in Babylonia the vision of the Ram and the Goat, Gabriel was sent to make him understand it. (Daniel viii. 16, 17.) And when, again, he was engaged in prayer and supplication, and was confessing the sins of his people, about the time of the evening oblation, Gabriel, being "caused to fly swiftly," came and touched him, and said, "At the beginning of thy supplications the commandment came forth, and I am come to show thee; for thou art greatly beloved;" and then proceeded to unfold to him the mystery of the seventy weeks. (Dan. ix. 21-24.) God "maketh His angels spirits, His ministers a flame of fire." Gabriel reached the prophet in the few moments that elapsed from the beginning of his supplications; and, made acquainted as he was with some of the secrets of the Eternal Mind, revealed to him events wrapt up as yet in the womb of the far-distant future.

But we read of Gabriel no more in the Old-Testament Scriptures. Ere he appears again in sacred history, the seventy prophetic weeks, or the four hundred and ninety years, of which he spoke, drew near their termination; and now he is sent, "in the sixth month, unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, to a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house
arguments in favour of this view may be found in Fairbairn's "Bible Dictionary," art. "Michael."

of David; and the virgin's name was Mary." (Luke i. 26, 27.)

Two genealogical tables are given in the Gospels: the one by St. Matthew, who wrote for the Jews, and who therefore ascends to Abraham, their great ancestor; the other by St. Luke, who wrote for Gentiles, and who therefore carries his list back to Adam, the great progenitor of mankind. It has been supposed by some, that St. Matthew gives the genealogy of Joseph, and St. Luke that of Mary; but, though the difficulties of harmonising the two lists are considerable, there is reason for believing that both represent the descent of Joseph,—that of Matthew his legal descent, as the heir to David's throne; that of Luke his private descent, as a member of David's house. At the same time Mary, too, was a descendant of the house of David; and through her, as well as through Joseph, Jesus was the rightful heir to the kingdom which it was predicted He should obtain.*

Nazareth, of which we shall hereafter speak more fully, was situated in a beautiful valley to the west of Mount Tabor, and is now called, in Arabic, En Nâzirah. The people of Israel were not so distinctly located as tribes in Palestine

* See, on this subject, Lord Harvey on the Genealogies; Mill's "Pantheistic Principles," 2d edition; and Fairbairn's "Hermeneutics."

after the captivity as they were before it; so that to find families belonging to the tribe of Judah dwelling in a village which originally belonged to that of Zebulon, is not at all surprising: and here, accordingly, Mary was residing, probably with her parents, whom an uncertain tradition calls Joachim and Anna, at the time of Gabriel's visit.

She was betrothed to Joseph, but not yet married. Among the Jews, an interval of ten or twelve months usually elapsed between betrothal and marriage; but though the parties had no communications with each other during that period, even in the way of conversation, yet they were spoken of as man and wife, and the contract formed between them was deemed of the most sacred character.

Mary was, doubtless, amiable and deeply pious. She had often heard of the promise of a Messiah, and had, perhaps, been given to understand that the time of His appearance now drew nigh. She was probably anticipating it with the highest hopes, and may, even at the time of Gabriel's visit, have been occupied in reading some of the prophecies of the Old Testament relating to the event. There is a well on the green open space at the north-west extremity of the town, which tradition points out as the scene of the Annunciation: but it is far more probable that it took place within her dwelling;

for the angel "came in unto her," that is, into her room or apartment, in a visible form, and that form the human, which is the form that angels always assume when visible to *man*. (Luke i. 28.)

Six months previously Gabriel had appeared to Zacharias, and had announced to him the future birth of John the Baptist,—an event which will form the subject of the succeeding chapter; but now Mary is the person whom he addresses, saying, "Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women." The word rendered "highly favoured" is only found here and in Ephes. i. 6, and signifies *to bestow grace*. It is expressive of the fact that God had chosen Mary to be the object of the special favour now to be conferred. She was to be more highly honoured than any other woman; not, however, because she was sinless and immaculate, as the Church of Rome teaches, but because it was the will of God to make her the earthly parent of the child Jesus. "Blessed," therefore, was she "among women;" for this choice on the part of God distinguished her above every other female born into the world.

But she was troubled at the angel's word,—troubled, not so much at his presence, as at what he said; and she "cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be." She was not, then,

agitated, but sufficiently calm to reflect upon the angel's words, the full import of which she could not, as yet, comprehend. He perceived her state of mind, and, to allay her anxiety, said, "Fear not, Mary; for thou hast found favour with God." The word Mary signifies "bitterness;" but now it is transformed into "blessedness:" for, like Noah, and Abraham, and Moses, and David, but in a higher sense than they, this holy maid had found favour with the Lord; even that favour which many a Hebrew woman had longed for from the time that the first promise of a Deliverer was given to Eve in paradise. "And, behold," said Gabriel, "thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a Son, and shalt call His name Jesus." The prophet Isaiah had said, "Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel;" but whether this Jewish maiden had ever thought upon these words we cannot tell. Now, however, they were about to be fulfilled, and Mary was to be the virgin in whom the fulfilment should take place. True, the angel did not say, "Thou shalt call His name Immanuel," but he said, "Thou shalt call His name Jesus." The one, however, involved the other; for He who would be Jesus—a Saviour, would also be Immanuel—God with us; and if Mary did not call her Child Immanuel, yet this was one of the titles given to Him by others,

and thus the Scripture was fulfilled.* Attempts have been made, both in earlier and in later times, to set aside the Messianic import of this prophecy; but whatever meaning the Jews may have attached to it, "the passage can refer to Christ only, and finds in Him not only the highest, but the only fulfilment."†

But what was to be the character of the future Child? "It is depicted," says one, "in terms of boundless grandeur." "He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God shall give unto Him the throne of His father David, and He shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of His kingdom there shall be no end." Of John, His forerunner, the angel said, "He shall be great:" but Jesus would be greater than John; for He would be called, and would really be, the Son of God, and His kingdom would be one whose splendour would never fade, and whose duration would never end. He would, indeed, reign not only over the house of Jacob, but also over all nations: but this fact, though implied in the words of the angel, is not expressed; for it would have been incomprehensible to Mary, and was only to be revealed as time elapsed. The knowledge of the Divinity of her Child was, in like manner,

* Isaiah vii. 14; comp. Matt. i. 23.

† See Hengstenberg's "Christology," vol. ii., p. 49, &c.; where this view of its import is explained and defended.

but just indicated to the Virgin; for it was a mystery which could only be unfolded fully as His redeeming work went on.

With child-like innocence Mary now asks, "How can this be?" She did not suppose that Joseph was to be the father of the child; and she therefore asked simply *how* the promise was to be accomplished. Her inquiry was not, as was that of Zacharias, indicative of unbelief; (Luke i. 18;) and hence Gabriel replied at once, "The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that Holy Thing that shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God." In these impressive words the miraculous conception of the Holy Child is clearly and expressly affirmed; and only by rejecting the testimony of St. Luke, and with it the faith of the Christian Church from the beginning, can the fact be set aside. The words themselves—"The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee," and "The power of the Highest shall overshadow thee"—denote, according to the Rev. Richard Watson, two things: the former, the miraculous production of Christ's human nature by the Spirit of God; the latter, the assumption of that nature, in an inseparable personal union, by the Eternal Son. Our Lord was in His Divine nature the Son of God from all eternity; but now, in His mysterious Person, the Divine and human natures are indissolubly united for evermore.

Perhaps to strengthen Mary's faith, the angel then said to her: "And, behold, thy cousin Elizabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren. For with God nothing shall be impossible." It has been supposed that, as Elizabeth belonged to the tribe of Levi, the relationship between her and Mary implies that the latter also belonged to that tribe: but, except in the case of heiresses whose family was in danger of becoming extinct,* there was no law to prevent the tribes from intermarrying; and therefore such an argument falls at once to the ground. Elizabeth was Mary's cousin; and on hearing these tidings respecting her, would not Mary think of Sarah, of Hannah, and of the wife of Manoah, of whom she had read in the Old-Testament Scriptures? and would she not be assured that, as with God nothing can be impossible, the angel's words would be accomplished in herself? Accordingly she yielded herself up to the will of God; and, with unwavering confidence, but with deep humility, she said, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word." And it was done. "Her conception of the Lord," says Alford, "is to be dated from the utterance of these words. She was no unconscious vessel of the Divine will, but, in humility and faith, a fellow-worker with

* See Num. xxxvi. 6.

the purpose of the Father ; and therefore her own unity with that purpose was required, and is here recorded."

Gabriel now departed from her. He had fulfilled his errand, and therefore returned to his heavenly abode ; there, perhaps, to communicate to his fellow-angels that the world's Redeemer would ere long be "manifested in the flesh."

A few days after, Mary "arose, and went into the hill country with haste, into a city of Judah ; and entered into the house of Zacharias, and saluted Elizabeth." The city here mentioned may have been Hebron, which, according to Joshua xxi. 11, was situated in the Negib, or south country of Judea ; but some suppose that the proper reading of the passage is "the city of Jutta," or "Juttah," which was in the same neighbourhood, and has been identified with a village called Yutta. (Joshua xv. 55.)* Both these cities were given to the priests, so that either of them may have been the residence of Zacharias ; but it is highly probable, as Reland conjectures, that the latter was the place of his abode. From Nazareth the distance is upwards of sixty miles : but Mary would travel to Jerusalem in company with some of her friends who were going to one of the great festivals of the nation ; and from Jerusalem some of them would, no doubt,

* Robinson's Bib. Researches, i. 494 ; ii. 206 ; 2d edit.

direct her to the abode of her cousin whom she sought.

It was a most joyous and happy meeting. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost, and the child leaped in her womb; for she recognised in Mary the mother of her Lord, and deemed it an honour to be favoured with her visit. The fact of Mary's faith in the announcement of the angel seems to have been suddenly revealed to her; for she said, "Blessed is she that believed: for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord." (Luke i. 42-45.) She thought, perhaps, of the unbelief of her husband Zacharias, and of the loss of his speech as the painful consequence; but she rejoiced in the simple trust of Mary, and she doubted not that all would come to pass which the angel had foretold.

Her psalm-like words produced on Mary's mind the happiest effect; for they tended to confirm her faith, and to enkindle in her breast the highest joy. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, she poured forth the strains of her beautiful Magnificat, which, says Oosterzee, "is evidently no carefully-composed ode, but the unpremeditated outpouring of deep emotion,—the improvisation of a happy faith. It was easy for Mary, a daughter of the royal race, well acquainted with the lyrics of the Old Testament, favoured by God, and filled with the Holy

Ghost, to become in an instant both poetess and prophetess ;”* and accordingly her song recalls, not only that of Hannah, (1 Sam. ii. 1,) but several passages in the Psalms. (Ps. cxiii., cxxvi.) Nay, “it sounds like an echo, not only of David’s and Hannah’s, but also of Miriam’s and of Deborah’s harps, yet independently reproduced in the mind of a woman who had laid up and kept in her heart what she had read in Holy Scripture.”

This beautiful song may be thus rendered and arranged :—

My soul doth magnify the Lord,
And my spirit hath exulted in God my Saviour.
For He hath regarded the humble condition of
His handmaid:
For, behold, from henceforth all generations shall
call me blessed.
Because great things hath the Almighty done for me ;
And holy is His name.
And His mercy is from generation to generation to
them that fear Him.
He hath wrought strength with His arm ;
He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of
their heart,
He hath cast down the mighty from their thrones,
And hath raised up the humble.
The hungry He hath filled with good,
And the rich He hath sent empty away.
He hath supported Israel His servant
In remembrance of mercy ;

* Lange’s Commentary on St. Luke, in loco ; Clark.

As He spake to our fathers, to Abraham and his seed for ever."*

An exposition of this song I shall not attempt; but against the interpretation put upon it by the Church of Rome, which has led to the Mariolatry now so rampant, what Protestant would not lift up his voice? Did the Virgin, by the utterance of these words, intend to lay claim to religious honours, or suppose that she would be exalted to the throne of her Son, and become a mediatrix between Him and the Church? Yet such is the position assigned to her by Popery; and the titles, "Mother of God," "Refuge of Sinners," "Queen of Heaven," are given to her constantly, whilst the Roman Missals contain prayers addressed to her, and songs to be chanted in her praise, from which the Christian mind revolts. On the 2d of December, 1854, a conclave of Bishops, summoned by Pius IX., met in the city of Rome, and there declared that the Virgin was born without sin; and now the dogma of her immaculate conception is an article of faith in the Church of Rome, to deny which is damnable heresy! Is it surprising that the power of the Papacy should be in peril? There is a God that judgeth in the earth, nor will He fail, sooner or later, to visit corrupt and fallen Churches with

* Luke i. 46-55; comp. Bishop Jebb's *Sacred Literature*, p. 392, 2d edit.

His righteous indignation, and, if they repent not, to sweep them from the earth.

That there are men of intelligence, education, and piety in the Church of Rome we grant ; but that such men should accept a dogma like this, on evidence so worthless, is certainly a strange fact. What can have led to credulity so great ? It has been suggested that, after the establishment of Christianity, men wanted an object of worship possessed, not of the attributes of strength or courage, so much as of gentleness, weakness, purity, and loveliness ; and that, forgetting that these qualities were truly found in Christ Himself, they were led to look upon the Virgin as their type and representative, and thus to transfer their homage to her. Romanism imbibed this error, and perpetuated it ; and now, forgetful of the true and perfect humanity of our Lord, it takes from Him a portion of the honour due to Him alone, and gives it to a creature who was herself dependent on His grace. But the character of Christ combines every excellence, and no one can be more tender and compassionate than He. We therefore need no mediatrix to come between us and Him ; for He ever sympathizes with His suffering people, and to Him they may repair with unwavering confidence in His love.

At Hebron Mary remained for a period of three months, after which she returned to

Nazareth. How bright and happy must those months have been! They were doubtless spent by her and her cousin in holy religious fellowship, and in mutual communion with God. The aged Elizabeth and the youthful Mary would be of one heart and mind, and many songs of gratitude and praise would they chant together before the throne of the Most High. Nor would they part in sorrow, but with exulting hope and joy. A new era was about to dawn. The long-expected day of liberty was at hand.

Joseph was probably residing at Nazareth when Mary returned thither to her home; but she kept silence before him, or perhaps, according to the customs of the times, did not converse with him at all. He heard, however, of her condition, and was sorely perplexed and tried. But he was a "just" man, and his tender regard for Mary would not permit him to expose her publicly. The Jewish law required a man who was espoused to a woman to give her, in case she proved unfaithful, a bill of divorce, and thus to put her away. (Deut. xxiv. 1—3; Matt. xix. 8.) But this could be done only in a public manner,* and would bring upon her who was put away dishonour and disgrace. What then could Joseph do? He shrank from exposing one so dear to him; and yet he could not marry her, except at the sacrifice of his own reputation

* See Lightfoot's Works, vol. xi., pp. 19 and 119, Pitman's edit.

and honour. He thought, therefore, of putting her away in some private manner. The Talmud says that a bill of divorce might, under some circumstances, be put into a woman's hand or bosom, two witnesses only being present. Mary perhaps heard of his intentions; and now that she was misunderstood, and in danger of being deserted, her faith must have been greatly and severely tried. But she made no effort to vindicate her character; but simply waited, believing that God would vindicate it for her. It was a mystery, also, too marvellous and tender to touch upon; and though, had she told Joseph what had taken place, he would no doubt have believed her, yet she did not speak, but kept silence; which, as one has said, was most fitting and congruous.

Her conduct was indicative of abiding trust in God. Perhaps she thought of the words of the Psalmist: "Commit thy way unto the Lord; trust also in Him; and He shall bring it to pass. And He shall bring forth thy righteousness as the light, and thy judgment as the noonday." (Ps. xxxvii. 5, 6.) There are many who, when their reputation is at stake, are in too great haste to have it vindicated, and who, for want of confidence in this promise, rush to the rescue of it in any way they can. But Mary waited; and she had her reward. For just as Joseph was about to carry out his design, behold, the angel

of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call His name Jesus; for He shall save His people from their sins." (Matt. i. 20, 21.)

In dreams and visions of the night, God often made known His will to the patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament dispensation; in dreams He gave to Joseph, the son of Jacob, an intimation of his future greatness; and now in dreams *this* Joseph is made acquainted with the Divine purposes and plans relative to the Saviour of the world. It was a lower form of revelation than that granted to Mary: but she was to become the real and only earthly parent of our Lord; and, from the nature of the communication made to her, it was perhaps necessary that it should be made in the higher form of personal converse with the angel in open day.

But the dream of Joseph was sufficient to satisfy his mind. The message of the angel was a most consolatory one. He addressed Joseph by name as a son of David; and bade him not fear to take to himself his espoused wife, for that which was conceived in her was of the Holy Ghost. How would his heart bound as he heard these words! For he did not doubt them. On awaking out of his sleep, he did not begin to

reason on the subject, and to fancy himself under some delusion. He was one of the pious few who were anticipating the coming of the long-expected Christ ; and now he heard that Mary was to bear Him, and that he himself was to be the foster-father of the Child. He doubted not the Divine origin of his dream, but at once took unto him his wife, in accordance with the word of the angel.

The expectations of Mary and Joseph in relation to the event now so near at hand would be of the most joyous kind ; and, recollecting the prophecies relating to the Messiah, their souls would exult in the prospect of His birth. But they did not noise the thing abroad, or make it the subject of common conversation. They thought upon it silently, but with holy hope and joy. It was not revealed to them *how* the Son of Mary would become a Saviour. Probably they looked for a temporal deliverer, who should liberate the Jews from the yoke of Rome, and raise the nation to its pristine dignity. True, they were told that He would “ save His people from their sins ; ” and these words might lead them to expect that He would be something more than a political and temporal deliverer : but only by degrees was the true import of the saying revealed to them ; for the mystery of the cross was wisely hidden from them, whilst as yet they were unable to receive it.

We are indebted for the facts at which we have now glanced to the early chapters of St. Matthew and St. Luke: but attempts have been made by rationalists and sceptics to prove that these chapters are mythical and untrue; and, of late, "lives" of Jesus have been written in which the true narrative of His birth is wholly ignored, and He is represented as an ordinary child who came into the world as all other children do. There is nothing mythical, however, in the character of these chapters; and they form a perfect contrast, in their simplicity and naturalness, to the myths of the so-called Protevangelium, or apocryphal Gospel of James.* "All the subtlety of the ablest adversaries of Christianity," says Dr. Mill, "has never been able to point out any incongruity of this description, or even the least repugnance to the condition and circumstances of Judaism, in any of the canonical Gospels."† And how could the three hymns called the Magnificat, the Benedictus, and the Nunc Dimittis have been produced at a later period? "Such a vision of coming power as these hymns indicate," says the same writer,— "a picture so vivid as to the blessedness of the approaching reign, so indistinct as to the means by which that blessedness was to be realized, in which, while the view of faith is so concentrated on the

* See Jones on the Canon, vol. ii.

† Pantheistic Principles, p. 115, 2d edit.

Source of salvation then initially manifested, the whole detail of His acts and the particulars of His redemption are closely wrapped up in the figure and symbol of the ancient dispensation,—such a vision could belong only to the particular position assigned to it in the boundary of the old and new covenants.” Only at this juncture, that is to say, could such strains have been poured forth as we listen to in these three canticles; and thus their genuineness is attested, and the credibility of St. Luke maintained.



CHAPTER II.



THE FORERUNNER OF THE HOLY CHILD.

SIX months prior to the annunciation of the birth of Jesus, the angel of the Lord appeared to Zacharias in the temple at Jerusalem, and foretold an event which, both to himself and to the Jewish nation, was fraught with the highest interest and importance.

Zacharias was a priest of the course of Abia, and his wife Elizabeth also belonged to the house of Aaron. In the days of David, king of Israel, the descendants of Eleazar and Ithamar, the sons of Aaron, were very numerous; and as all were entitled to serve in the office of the priesthood, they were divided into twenty-four courses,—sixteen of the house of Eleazar, his family being far the larger, and eight of the house of Ithamar. Each course had a chief, who was originally chosen by lot, and of these chiefs Abijah or Abia is mentioned as the eighth in order; but whether he was a descendant of Eleazar or of Ithamar does not

appear. (See 1 Chron. xxiv. 1—19.) When Solomon had built the temple, he continued to observe the arrangement made by his father David; for he appointed “the courses of the priests to their service, and the Levites to their charges, to praise and minister before the priests, as the duty of every day required.” (2 Chron. viii. 14.) But of these courses only four returned from the captivity in Babylon, of which that of Abia was not one. (Ezra ii. 36—39; Neh. vii. 39—42.) The number of the priests, however, was considerable: for of the house of Jeshua there were nine hundred and seventy-three; of the house of Immer a thousand and fifty-two; of the house of Pashur a thousand two hundred and forty-seven; and of the house of Harim a thousand and seventeen; making a total of four thousand two hundred and eighty-nine. It is probable that these four courses were now divided into twenty-four bearing the original names; for Zacharias is said to have been of the *course* of Abia: but it is not said that he was of the *family* of Abia; “for the family of Abia was not now extant among the courses; for there is no mention at all of him among the priests that returned out of the captivity.”* According to Josephus, there were, in the time of Zacharias, many thousands of priests, and the several courses were chosen by lot (probably in the hall

* Lightfoot's Works, vol. ix., p. 49.

Gazith, where the Sanhedrim assembled) to serve in the temple for one week each. "The ruler of the temple saith, Come ye, and cast your lots, that it may be determined who shall kill the sacrifice, who sprinkle the blood, who sweep the inner altar; who cleanse the candlestick, who carry the parts of the sacrifice to the ascent of the altar, &c. He hath it to whom it happens by lot."*

It happened, then, by lot, that it was the week of service for the priests of the course of Abia; and some, therefore, would be engaged in slaying the sacrifices, others in pouring out the blood upon the altar, and others in bringing fuel to the holy fire. The duty of Zacharias was of the most solemn nature; for it had fallen to his lot to offer incense in the holy place. (Luke i. 9.) Incense was originally composed of the perfumes stacte, onycha, galbanum, and frankincense; but Josephus and the Rabbis say that afterwards several other ingredients were added, including cassia, spikenard, and salt. They were tempered by an apothecary, who had an apartment in the temple, where a supply was always in readiness, and over which a priest or Levite watched with the utmost care. The incense was burnt on an altar of shittim-wood, overlaid with gold, which stood in the holy place before the veil that separated that place from the holiest of all.

* Lightfoot, vol. xii., p. 14.

(Exod. xxx. 34—37; xxxvii. 25.) The times of offering it were when the lamps were trimmed before the morning sacrifice, and after the lamps were lighted in the evening, and the evening sacrifice had been offered.*

When the ceremonial law was first instituted, the high priest alone could offer incense; (Exod. xxx. 7, 8;) and hence it has been supposed that Zacharias was the high priest: but we learn from the Mishna, and other Jewish writings, that in the second temple the duty was performed by any of the priests to whose lot it fell. None, however, but a priest could offer it; and hence, when Uzziah, the king, ventured into the sanctuary with a censer in his hand, he was smitten with leprosy, and compelled to retire from the place in haste. (2 Chron. xxvi. 18—20.)† For what did incense represent? It was the symbol of prayer; (Ps. cxli. 2;) or, as some have represented it, of the intercession of Christ, (Rev. viii. 3, 4,) of whom the high priest, under the law, was the type and representative. None, therefore, but one anointed for the priesthood could engage in so high and holy a service.

“The temple seems at this time,” says Lange,‡ “to have been almost entirely occupied by a dead and hypocritical priesthood; but the

* Lightfoot, vol. xii., pp. 16, 17.

† Comp. Josephus Antiq., ix., x., 4.

‡ Life of Christ, vol. i., p. 345.

Spirit of revelation knew how to find the healthy member of the diseased body." The name Zacharias signifies "the Lord remembers;" and that of Elizabeth, "God of the oath." Both these persons were righteous before God, "walking in the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless." But they had no child, and they were now considerably advanced in years. Perhaps they had often prayed for a son; and even yet, remembering the case of Abraham and Sarah, they might not have entirely abandoned the hope that their prayer would be answered. And now Zacharias, clad in his sacerdotal robes, passes through the outer courts of the temple, and, with a censer in his hand, enters the sanctuary, and stands before the golden altar. Incense is brought to him in a golden vessel by an assistant priest. That priest retires, and remains, together with all the priests of the course of Abia, and perhaps many of the Levites, in the outer court, until Zacharias shall return. He, then, is alone in the holy place. The holy fire is burning on the altar, and he takes from it a live coal, and puts it upon the incense in the censer which he holds. Presently there arises a fragrant odour, and a cloud of smoke ascends towards heaven. Wrapped in the fervency of prayer for Israel, he bows before the mercy-seat of the Most High God. Through the cloud of smoke he suddenly beholds, standing at the

right side of the altar of incense, an angel of the Lord, and is seized with trembling and great fear. (Luke i. 5—12.)

But Gabriel addressed him, and his first words were, "Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard, and thy wife Elizabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John. And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth." How joyous were these words! Nothing could have been more acceptable to Zacharias than this intelligence. His prayer was heard; and though, like Abraham and Sarah, he and his wife were "well stricken in years," yet, like Abraham and Sarah, they also were to embrace a son. The angel went on to speak of the character and office of that son. He would be "great in the sight of the Lord;" and, like Samson, a Nazarite from his birth, but far superior to Samson, for he would be "filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb." He would come "in the spirit and power of Elias;" would be the forerunner of the promised Messiah, and the means of turning "the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just;" thus making "ready a people prepared for the Lord."

At once, on hearing these words, Zacharias would be reminded of the language of Isaiah, (xl. 3,) "The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord;" and of

the remarkable prediction of the prophet Malachi, (iii. 1,) "Behold, I will send My messenger, and he shall prepare the way before Me." He would gather that the son about to be given him would be this messenger; and that, like that bold and faithful man Elijah, who in the days of Ahab stood forth as a witness for the Lord Jehovah, would lift up his voice against the degeneracy of the times, and be the means of effecting a moral reformation in the land. But if the *forerunner* of the Messiah was at hand, then the Messiah *Himself* must speedily appear; and Zacharias must have felt at this moment a thrill of unutterable joy at the prospect of the events which rose before his view.

But unbelief arose, and his heart misgave him. "Whereby shall I know this?" he asked; "for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years." When Abraham received a similar promise, it is said that "he staggered not at the promise through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God." (Rom. iv. 20.) But Zacharias did stagger for the moment; for, unlike that of Abraham, his faith failed, and he had to be reminded of the fact that nothing is impossible with God. The angel replied, "I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to show thee these glad tidings." How dignified was this answer! "I am Gabriel." Of Gabriel Zacharias

had often read in the book of the prophet Daniel, and had probably wondered at the mysterious visits which he paid to that illustrious man ; and now he is informed that, after a lapse of more than five hundred years, this celestial being has visited the earth again, and that he is now conversing with him as he did with the prophet of old.

Zacharias asked for an additional sign, the vision of the angel being insufficient for him. A sign is given him. "Behold, thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed, because thou believest not my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season." How remarkable a punishment ! how severe, and yet how merciful ! From that moment until the birth of the promised son, Zacharias would remain speechless ; so that his words of unbelief sealed his lips for several months. "That tongue which moved the doubt must be tied up. He shall ask no more questions for forty weeks, because he asked this one distrustfully."*

Shall we carp at this, as certain rationalists have done, and think it cruel that the aged man should have been deprived of his speech for such a fault ? God forbid. "We regard it," says Dr. Mill, "among the greatest of the unhappinesses, as well as of the follies, which rejection of God's

* Bishop Hall's *Contemplations*, vol. ii.

revelation brings with it, that it leaves untamed the pride which canvasses and questions the proceedings of Omniscience." Important purposes were to be answered by this visitation on Zacharias. His own unbelief was to be cured, and a deeper impression was to be made on the minds of the people without, by which they were to be prepared for the events now near at hand.

"When the priest went in unto the Holy Place to burn incense, notice was given to all, by the sound of a little bell, that the time of prayer was now."* Accordingly, the people were praying without, but now waited for the return of Zacharias, and wondered why he tarried so long. This was unusual; and we can imagine how eagerly the multitude would look towards the holy place, and how they would begin to ask one another, with a kind of solemn awe, "What has happened to him? Why does he not appear?" Some have thought that they were waiting for the priestly benediction; but others think that it was now evening, and that the benediction was pronounced only after the offering of the morning sacrifice. However this might be, they became deeply anxious, nor were any of them disposed to leave the spot until the mystery was solved. But at length he returns; his countenance how changed—his demeanour how remarkable! They begin to question him,

* Lightfoot's Works, vol. xii., p. 16.

but he cannot speak to them. If they were expecting the benediction, he cannot utter it. Only by signs is he able to explain to them that he has seen a vision; and the people return home with a deep conviction on their minds that events of no ordinary character are about to take place.

Zacharias continued to exercise his priestly function to the close of the week; for it is said that "as soon as the days of his ministration were accomplished, he departed to his own house." "He takes not his dumbness," says Bishop Hall, "for a dismissal, but stays out the eight days of his course; as one that knew the eyes, and hands, and heart would be accepted of that God who had deprived him of his tongue." No words were spoken by the priest who offered incense; and hence, though speechless, Zacharias could still perform the duties of his office, and was unwilling to relinquish them until he had fulfilled his course. Then, however, he returned to his abode, where his wife Elizabeth, unless she had previously heard of these events, would be not less surprised at his being unable to speak than were the people who had waited for his return from the Holy Place on this memorable day.

Elizabeth probably now lived for some time in comparative retirement. Meanwhile Gabriel's visit to Mary took place, and the circumstances

followed which we have described in the previous chapter. Months passed on, and then the time drew near when the birth of the forerunner should take place. Amidst the congratulations and rejoicings of Elizabeth's friends the child was born; and the entire neighbourhood shared in the gladness caused by the event. The Church of Alexandria solemnised the birth-day of the Baptist on the 23d of April; but, at a subsequent period, the Greek and Latin Churches, having resolved to celebrate the nativity of Christ on the 25th of December, reckoned backwards six months, and adopted as John's birth-day the 24th of June. It is not probable, as we shall see hereafter, that either of these dates is correct: for it is much more likely that our Lord was born in the month of February, B.C. 4, and that, therefore, the birth of John took place in August or September, B.C. 3.

In obedience to the law of Moses, John was circumcised on the eighth day; when also, according to Jewish custom, he received his name. There were present a considerable number of his relatives; and they were calling—*ἐκάλουν*—him "Zacharias," after the name of his father: but his mother said, "Not so; he shall be called John." She had learnt from her husband, by means of writing, that this was to be his name; but her friends knew nothing of it, and hence they remonstrated with her on the ground that none

of her kindred were so called. Among the Jews, names were frequently retained in families for several generations; and that of John being perfectly new to his family, it was not unnatural that these parties should object to it. By signs, they appealed to Zacharias, who was deaf as well as dumb; and he asked for a writing-table, on which to inscribe the name of the child. This writing-table—*πινακίδιον*—was either a small tablet covered with wax, on which the letters were written with an iron style, or merely a piece of wood on which they were painted with a black tincture or ink.* On this tablet Zacharias wrote, "*His name is John.*" The friends wondered—wondered at the name; and, perhaps, also at the coincidence that both the parents should thus name him. But was the name an appropriate one? It frequently occurs in the Old Testament under the form *Johanan*, and that is an abbreviation of *Jehohanan*; and it signifies literally *Jehovah's gift*. It was, then, most appropriate; for the child now born was *Jehovah's gift* indeed, and that not to his parents only, but to the entire nation of the Jews.

"The last writing in the Old Testament," observes Bengel, "ends in a curse. (Mal. iv. 6.) This, the first instance of writing in the New Testament, begins with grace." And the moment after the word "*John*" was written, the

* See Jahn's *Antiquities*, sec. 87.

mouth of Zacharias was opened, and he spake and praised God. What a burst of praise it must have been, when, after having been speechless so many months, he found himself able to speak again, and to hear the conversation of his friends ! As a long pent-up spring, when suddenly opened, pours forth its treasures with impetuous eagerness, and perhaps sends up a jet of water as if conscious of its strength, so would the mouth of the holy priest pour forth its strains of joy and gladness, until every one who heard him would wonder at his words.

The immediate effect produced on the minds of all present by the event was that of fear ; and this fear spread through the entire vicinity ; for what had occurred was noised abroad throughout all the hill-country of Judæa. “ And all that heard laid it up in their hearts, saying, What manner of child shall this be ! ” That he would prove no ordinary child, they already felt assured ; and probably they supposed that now a new era was about to dawn upon the land. The evangelist adds, “ And the hand of the Lord was with him ; ” in reference, perhaps, to the words of the angel, “ He shall be great in the sight of the Lord.” The hand of the Lord was with him from the womb,—with him in his infancy,—with him in his childhood and youth ; and he was filled with the Holy Ghost.

The song of praise to which Zacharias gave

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utterance is second only in importance to the "Magnificat" of Mary. Alford observes that this song is entirely Hebrew in its cast and idioms, and might be rendered in that language almost word for word. In its poetic form it is as follows :—

" BLESSED BE THE LORD, THE GOD OF ISRAEL:

For He hath visited and hath wrought redemption
for His people,

And hath raised up an horn of salvation for us in
the house of David His servant;

As He spake by the mouth of the holy ones—the
prophets—from the beginning,

That we should be saved from our enemies,

And from the hand of all that hate us :

To perform the mercy with our fathers,

And to remember His holy covenant ;

The oath which He sware to Abraham our
father,

Of giving us, being delivered from the hands of
our enemies,

To serve Him without fear, in holiness and
righteousness before Him, all our days.

" And thou, child, the prophet of the Highest shalt
be called ;

For thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to
prepare His ways ;

To give knowledge of salvation to His people

In the remission of their sins,

Through the inward affection of the mercy of our
God ;

Whereby the day-dawn from on high hath visited
us,

To give light to those who are sitting in darkness and the shadow of death;

To guide our feet into the way of peace."

(Luke i. 68—79.)

This song, as is evident, consists of two portions. In the first, (verses 68—75,) Zacharias blesses the Lord God of Israel for having now, at length, visited and redeemed His people, in accordance with the predictions of "the sacred circle of the prophets," commencing from the earliest ages, and continuing to the close of the Old-Testament canon. He had raised or was now raising up an horn of salvation in the house of David His servant,—an horn by means of which His people would be able to defend themselves against their enemies, and to push them down, even as horned animals, though feeble in themselves, are formidable in resisting the attacks of the strongest beasts of prey. Some have supposed that Zacharias here indulges a hope of temporal deliverance, and anticipates the coming of a period when the Romans would be driven from the land, and when the Jews would be able, without fear of molestation, to observe their sacred festivals as in days gone by. But a deeper meaning than this is conveyed in his noble song. The enemies referred to are sin and Satan; these being the real cause of all the troubles of the nation; and only when delivered from them could the people serve

God in righteousness and holiness all their days. A Saviour from sin was the Saviour promised by oath unto David; a Saviour from sin was the Saviour whom Zacharias now proclaimed as near.

In the second part of the song Zacharias addresses his own child, and designates him "the prophet of the Highest," who should go before the Messiah, to prepare His way. And this he should do by giving the *knowledge* of salvation to His people in the actual remission of their sins. The Messiah Himself would give salvation; but John would give the knowledge of it, by awakening in the mind a sense of its necessity, and by pointing to Him who alone could impart it. The sacrifices of the Levitical dispensation could never purify the conscience; (Heb. ix. 13;) and hence those who cherished a desire for pardon, as did David and many others, (see Ps. ii.,) obtained that pardon through faith in the Saviour yet to come. The bowels of the Divine compassion had long yearned over a fallen race; but now the Sun of Righteousness was gilding with his beams the mountain-tops, and soon that light would pour itself into the gloomiest valleys, and even those who sat in darkness and the shadow of death would be enlightened by His rays, and their feet would be guided into the way of peace. John was to be as the morning star, the harbinger of approaching

day: Christ was to be the Sun, whose dawn or rising—*ἀνατολή*—would eclipse his light; would illumine the pathway of erring man, and would lead him into a course of inward peace, the end of which would be the blessedness of immortality. (Comp. Mal. iv. 2.) The above word, which our translators have rendered day-spring, is used by the LXX. for the Hebrew word *צֶמַח* branch or sprig; (Isaiah iv. 2; Jer. xxiii. 5; Zech. iii. 8;) in reference to the gradual rising up of the branch out of the root; and some would so render it here: but the metaphor is evidently of another kind, and refers to the dawning of the day after a long and gloomy night.

Was it, then, on the Jews only that all these benefits were to be conferred? That Zacharias had in view his own people in particular, we cannot doubt; but that the Holy Spirit, under whose inspiration he uttered these words, meant to include the Gentiles, is evident from the terms employed. Who were those that were sitting in darkness and the shadow of death, but the nations that lived beyond the confines of Palestine,—the Greeks, the Romans, and the countless tribes that peopled the vast regions of the East and of the South? Over them—notwithstanding all their greatness, their boasted civilization, their commerce, their wealth, their poetry, and their arts—a night of spiritual death had cast its broad

and ever-deepening shadow ; a shadow which nothing could remove but the light of that Sun whose beams were now beginning to shoot forth. Isaiah had long before said, "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light : they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined." (Isa. ix. 2.) And again, addressing the Church, "Arise, shine ; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee. For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people : but the Lord shall arise upon thee, and His glory shall be seen upon thee." (Isaiah lx. 1, 2.) And what were the words of Zacharias but an echo of these earlier prophecies, or a renewal of the same exulting strains ? Scarcely could the good man fail, as he uttered the closing expressions of his song, to revert to these predictions of the ancient bard ; and already, therefore, he would understand in part, that the Christ before whom his new-born son would go, would be Saviour both of the Jews and of the Gentiles. The Jewish Church would first catch the light of this glorious Sun, and then would the nations come to His light, and kings to the brightness of His rising. For again Isaiah had said, "It is a light thing that Thou shouldest be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel : I will also give Thee for a light to the Gentiles, that Thou

mayest be My salvation unto the end of the earth." (Isaiah xlix. 6.)

"The song of Zacharias," says Oosterzee in Lange's Commentary, "is a proof that his spiritual life, and his insight into the Divine plan of salvation, had increased during the months of silence which succeeded his reception of the angelic message. Theologians who deny the existence of Messianic prophecies, properly so called,—i.e., of special promises given by God Himself with respect to the coming of Christ,—should take a lesson from Mary and Zacharias. In their view, '*God spake by the mouth of the holy prophets*;' spake since the world began; spake to Abraham and his seed of the coming Christ; spake so that all future ages might believe and expect that all that was yet unfulfilled would surely come to pass." Truly may such theologians learn a lesson here; but it is to be feared that many of them lack the simplicity, the teachableness, and the humility, which would lead them to sit at the feet of such instructors. Yet it were better far to sit here, than at the feet of the most learned Jewish Rabbis, or at those of the most skilful grammarians and critics that modern times have produced.

After recording the song of Zacharias, the evangelist St. Luke, in a closing paragraph, indicates the character of the child now born. "And the child grew, and waxed strong in

spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his showing unto Israel." *He grew*, that is, in stature ; so that probably his form was noble and imposing, even whilst yet a boy. *He waxed strong in spirit* ; so that he soon rose above childish timidity and fear ; and, filled with the Holy Ghost, he was bold enough to grapple with the temptations which assailed him, and manful enough to avow himself a servant of the Lord Jehovah. For such an office as he was to enter upon, courage was indispensable ; and his mental development was such that, as the time drew near when he must become the great preacher of repentance, he was lacking in no essential qualifications for the task. Youth is the time to prepare for any great life-work which a man may have to do ; for if the foundations be not laid then, the probability is, that they will afterwards be laid very imperfectly, or never laid at all.

"*He was in the deserts until the day of his showing unto Israel.*" His was no soft or effeminate life. He drank neither wine nor strong drink ; nor did he seek the society of the rich, the learned, or the great ; but, like Elijah, his type, he led a lonely life in those wild and desolate regions that lie between the hill-country of Judæa and the borders of the Dead Sea. On the north-western shores of that sea were the settlements of the Essenes, a sect of the Jews described by Philo and Josephus as living by the

most ascetic rules, and practising the greatest self-denial. "They alone, of almost all men," says Philo, "having been originally poor and destitute, and that, too, rather from their own habits and ways of life, than from any real deficiency of good fortune, are nevertheless accounted very rich, judging contentment and frugality to be great abundance, as in truth they are."* Now it has been said that John belonged to this order; and that when Christ "pronounced him to be Elias, He declared that the Baptist had really attained to that spirit and power which the Essenes strove to obtain in their highest style of purity." But this is a mistake. That John may have come in contact with some of the Essenes, we admit; but that he was himself an Essene, there is no evidence whatever to show. He was far superior to that sect both in theory and practice. He did not go into the deserts because he feared to associate with mankind, or because he supposed that sanctity of life was necessarily connected with retirement from the world: he went there rather, as did St. Paul after his conversion, to meditate on the things of God, and to gain by prayer, reflection, and study of the Scriptures, a fitting preparation for his important mission.

But at length, when probably he was about thirty years of age, the day came for his "*mani-*

* "On the virtuous being also free," xii.

festation,"—ἀνάδειξις—"unto Israel." He then made his public appearance in "the country about Jordan;" and, lifting up his voice like a trumpet, caused the valleys to resound with the cry, "Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Matt. iii. 1, 2.)



CHAPTER. III.



THE BIRTH-PLACE OF THE HOLY CHILD.

MANY of the birth-places of the great and good possess for mankind a lasting interest. We inquire into their history with pleasure; and if ever an opportunity of visiting them is afforded, we avail ourselves of it with the least possible delay. Nor is our gratification diminished if we find any such place comparatively small. On the contrary, the very fact of its being somewhat insignificant in appearance adds to the charm of the association; for, though little, it has become great, because one born in it rose above the common level of our race, and obtained a name of honour and renown.

And there is many a village, both in our own and other lands, which has become celebrated in this way. Of no importance in itself, it has gained a place in history as the spot where some eminent poet, philosopher, or statesman first saw the light; and its inhabitants speak of it with as much enthusiasm as the most distinguished

metropolis calls forth in the breasts of those who dwell in it.

There is no birth-place in the world around which so much interest gathers as Bethlehem. In that little city was born the Holy Child, the Prince of Peace, the Saviour of our sinful race. "But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall He come forth unto me, that is to be Ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting."* Such is one of those clear and definite predictions with which the Old-Testament Scriptures abound, and which modern rationalists, who would fain get rid of prophecy altogether, know not how to set aside. They tell us, indeed, that the Deliverer who was to come out of Bethlehem was to be "a contemporary shield against the Assyrians,"† and thus they insinuate that Micah could not here refer to the Messiah; but they do not tell us how it could be said of any temporal deliverer that his goings forth are "from the days of eternity;" nor can they name any such deliverer at all, except Zerubbabel, and certainly he was not born in Bethlehem. But that the words of Micah marked out this city as the birth-place of the expected Christ, was the opinion of the ancient Jews, was held by the early Christian Church, and has been maintained

* Micah. v. 2.

† "Essays and Reviews," p. 68.

by all sound interpreters of Scripture to the present day.

There was another town called Bethlehem, which was situated in the territory of Zebulon,* and which has been identified with the modern Beit Lahm, a very miserable village, about seven miles west of Nazareth.† It has been supposed that the prophet Micah designates the Bethlehem to which he refers *Bethlehem-Ephratah* to distinguish it from this other town; but a far more probable conjecture is, that he refers to the import of the two words,—Bethlehem, *the house of bread*; and Ephratah, *the field of fruit*; intending to lay stress on their typical import. Hengstenberg, however, supposes that the second name is added because it was the name rendered sacred to memory from the time of the patriarch Jacob, and by the authority of the most ancient documents of revelation.‡

That Bethlehem was a *little* city, is indicated by the fact that it is not mentioned in the list of the towns of Judah given in the Book of Joshua. It is true that the word Ephratah is inserted here in the version of the LXX.; but its genuineness is not admitted. “The children,” or “the men of Bethlehem,” are mentioned in Ezra ii. 21, and in Neh. vii. 26; but in the catalogue of towns in Neh. xi. 25, &c., no reference is made to the

* Joshua xix. 15. † Robinson’s “Researches,” vol. iii., p. 113.

‡ “Christology,” vol. iv., p. 477.

place, so that even then it must have been a very obscure spot. In Luke ii. 11 it is called a "city," πόλις; but in John vii. 42, it is simply designated a "village,"—κώμη. In a word, it was so small as to be combined with other places in the enumeration of "the thousands of Judah," the number of its inhabitants not amounting to a thousand. "It is self-evident," says Hengstenberg, "that the thought here is, that Bethlehem is too little to constitute a thousand *by itself*. Communities, however, which were not sufficient to constitute, by themselves, a generation or family, were reckoned with others, and formed, with them, an artificial generation—an artificial family;" and thus was Bethlehem reckoned in the division of the towns of Judah.

But, small as Bethlehem was, it has a history which commences at a very early date; and that history is so full of interest, and is so closely connected with the event which we shall hereafter contemplate, that it is desirable to sketch the outlines of it with accuracy and care.

Bethlehem is first mentioned in connexion with the history of the patriarch Jacob. He had come to Bethel, in mount Ephraim, and was on his way to Hebron to visit Isaac his father, who was now approaching his end; when "as they journeyed from Bethel, and there was but a

little way to come to Ephrath," Rachel, his beloved wife and the mother of his Joseph, again travailed and "had hard labour." She gave birth to a son, whom she called Benoni, "the son of my sorrow;" for in giving him birth she died. Yes, "she died, and was buried in the way to Ephrath, which is Bethlehem."* Deep was Jacob's sorrow for his loss; and he set up a pillar over her grave, and then went on his way. The event was one of the most melancholy in his history; and when, upwards of twenty years after, he went to Egypt, and there summoned to his sick couch Joseph and his two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, he touchingly alluded to it in his address to Joseph: "And as for me, when I came from Padan, Rachel died by me in the land of Canaan in the way, when yet there was but a little way to come unto Ephrath: and I buried her there in the way of Ephrath; the same is Bethlehem."† She died "by me," and "I buried her." We may suppose, then, that Jacob watched her in her departing moments, and that he himself deposited her remains in the grave with great lamentation and many tears. Hallowed, therefore, was Ephrath in the patriarch's remembrance from that very hour; and it is probable that, ere he left Canaan, he oft-times visited the spot.

* Gen. xxxv. 16—19. † Gen. xlviii. 7.

In the midst of the beautiful olive-grove on the side of the hill approaching Bethlehem, Rachel's grave is still marked by a square building of stone with a dome; which, when visited by Dr. Robinson, was in a state of decay, but has since been restored at the expense of Sir Moses Montefiore. It attracts alike the reverence of Christians, Jews, and Mussulmans.*

Bethlehem is mentioned in the Book of Judges, (xvii. 7; xix. 1, 2,) in such a way as to lead to the inference that, though not a Levitical town, it was partly inhabited by Levites. At a later period it appears in the pages of Jewish history, in connexion with the beautiful idyll of the Book of Ruth. There was a dearth in the land, and a man named Elimelech, who resided in Bethlehem, was induced to repair with his wife Naomi and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, to a more fertile district in the plains of Moab. Here he died, and here his two sons subsequently married. But they, too, died; and then Naomi and her daughters-in-law were left widows in what, to Naomi, was a strange land. She resolved, therefore, to return to her country; for she had heard that the Lord had visited His people; and her two daughters-in-law accompanied her on the way. But she was reluctant to take them with her into Judæa, and she

* Stanley's "Lectures," p. 72.

therefore kissed them, and urged them to go back. It was a touching scene; and "they lifted up their voice, and wept again." One of them, named Orpah, kissed her mother-in-law, and went back to her own home; but the other—Ruth—clave to her, and said, "Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God." (Ruth i. 16.)

The two widows, Naomi and Ruth, arrived at Bethlehem. It was the beginning of barley-harvest, and the reapers were already in the fields. Busy, however, as the people were, the return of Naomi caused no little excitement in the city; and they said, as with surprise, one to another, "Is not this Naomi?" But she was dispirited and sorrowful; and she said, "Call me not Naomi,"—*pleasant*; "call me Mara,"—*bitter*: "for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me." So, doubtless, she thought; for she went out full, but had returned empty. But, as is often the case in times of trial, God had good things in store for her and for her faithful daughter-in-law; and, ere long, both the widows were made glad by the gracious interference of His superintending hand.

There was a law in the Mosaic code which required a brother, or the nearest male relative,

of a husband who had died without issue, to marry his widow ; and the first-born son of such a marriage was to take the name of the deceased kinsman, and thus perpetuate his line. Now there was a kinsman of Naomi's husband, named Boaz, a mighty man of wealth, whom she supposed to be the person on whom the duty of the Goel towards her daughter-in-law would devolve. Ruth was therefore sent to glean in the fields of Boaz, and was treated kindly both by him and his servants. When the wheat-harvest was gathered in, Boaz slept in the threshing-floor ; and now Ruth was requested by Naomi to go and lie at his feet, and thus to remind him of the fact that he was next of kin to her deceased husband. She did so ; and the result was that he " plucked off his shoe " at the gate of the city, as the custom was, and Boaz bought the inheritance of Elimelech, together with all that was Chilion's and Mahlon's, of the hand of Naomi, and at the same time purchased Ruth the Moabitess, to be his wife. " A child was born ; ' and Naomi took the child, and laid it in her bosom, and became nurse to it.' It would seem as if there was already a kind of joyous foretaste of the birth and infancy which, in after-times, was to be for ever associated with the name of Bethlehem. It was the first appearance on the scene of what may, by anticipation, be called, even then, the Holy Family ; for that child was

Obed, the father of Jesse, the father of David. Nor is it a mere genealogical connection between the two generations. The very license and independence of the age may be said to have been the means of introducing into the ancestry of David and the Messiah an element which else would have been, humanly speaking, impossible. 'An Ammonite or a Moabite shall not enter into the congregation.'* This was the letter of the law; and in the greater strictness that prevailed after the return from the captivity, it was rigidly enforced. But in the isolation of Judah from the rest of Israel, in the doing of every man what was right in his own eyes, the more comprehensive spirit of the whole religion overstepped the letter of a particular enactment. The story of Ruth has shed a peaceful light over what, else, would be the accursed race of Moab. We strain our gaze to know something of the long line of the purple hills of Moab, which form the back-ground at once of the history and of the geography of Palestine. It is a satisfaction to feel that there is one tender association which unites them with the familiar history and scenery of Judæa; that from their recesses, across the deep gulf which separates the two regions, came the gentle ancestress of David and of the Messiah."†

* Deut. xxiii. 3; Ezra ix. 1; Neh. xiii. 1.

† Stanley's "Lectures," First Series, p. 303.

The Book of Ruth stands in the Jewish canon in connection with that of Judges; but Augustine thought that it should belong, as a preface, to the first Book of Samuel. Its authorship has been assigned respectively to Samuel, to Hezekiah, and to Ezra; but whoever wrote it, its genuineness and authenticity cannot, with any fairness, be called in question. It bears upon the face of it the stamp of truth. The beautiful picture of the reapers is true to nature, even at the present day. Early in the spring—March or April—there may still be seen in the neighbourhood of Bethlehem merry and delighted people cutting down the corn; and, after it is gathered, gleaners picking up the ears that happen to be left behind. And with reference to sleeping on the threshing-floors in Palestine, Dr. Robinson observes, while in the vicinity of Hebron, “The fine grassy slope on which we were encamped, besides the cemetery on the north, was occupied towards the south by threshing-floors, where the various processes of threshing, or rather treading-out the grain, were continually going on. The wheat-harvest, here in the mountains, had not yet arrived, but they were threshing barley, ‘adas’ or lentiles, and also vetches, called by the Arabs ‘kersenna,’ which are raised chiefly for camels. The various parcels had apparently lain here for several days: the people would come with their cattle,

and work for two or three hours, and then go away. Some had three animals, some four; and once I saw two young cattle and a donkey driven round together. In several of the floors they were winnowing the grain by tossing it up across the wind with a fork. Here we needed no guard around our tent. The owners of the crops came every night, and slept upon their threshing-floors to guard them; and this we found to be universal in all the regions of Gaza. We were in the midst of scenes precisely like those of the Book of Ruth, where Boaz winnowed barley in the threshing-floor, and laid himself down at night to guard the heap of corn.”*

The boyhood of Obed, the son of Ruth, was no doubt spent in Bethlehem and the neighbourhood; and here he lived when he became a man. To his son, Jesse, eight sons were born; of whom the youngest was David, who also spent his boyhood and his youth in Bethlehem. On the adjacent hills he watched his father's flocks, and sang his pastoral songs, accompanying them with the music of the pipe or harp. How beautiful are the strains of the twenty-third Psalm, in which David acknowledges God as his Shepherd, who will ever supply his needs; and how sublime are the thoughts of the nineteenth Psalm, in which the starry heavens are represented as declaring the Divine glory, and the

* *Researches*, vol. ii., page 83, 2d edit.

sun is pictured as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber and rejoicing as a strong man to run a race! Only in such a locality could songs like these have been produced, and no doubt can be entertained that they were written by the noble-minded son of Jesse. They may, indeed, have been composed at a somewhat later period in his life; for, as Hengstenberg observes of the twenty-third Psalm, "Everywhere it is not the sun-burnt shepherd-boy in the midst of his peaceful lambs that meets us here, but the man David, who had experienced the hardships of the days of Saul." Perhaps, also, the nineteenth Psalm was written after David had obtained possession of the throne; but in both these productions the recollections of his youth are evident, and in both he recognises God's guiding and sustaining hand.

He was occupied one day in his duties as a shepherd when a messenger came to him from his father, telling him that he was wanted in Bethlehem without delay. What had happened? It was probably the season of the annual sacrifice in the little town, and, much to the dismay of the inhabitants, the prophet Samuel had appeared, and had summoned Jesse and his sons to the sacrifice of a heifer. He had come, however, peacefully; for he had received instructions from God to anoint one of the sons of Jesse king, in the room of the disobedient Saul. The

heifer is slain, and they are waiting to sit down to the repast. But neither Eliab, though tall and stately, nor Abinadab, nor Shammah, nor any one of Jesse's seven sons present, is the one approved; and Samuel inquires, "And are here all thy children?" Jesse replies, "There remaineth yet the youngest, and, behold, he keepeth the sheep." "Send and fetch him," says the prophet; "for we will not sit round till he come hither." He comes, and at once attracts the attention of the seer. In stature he is short, but he is strong and agile; and he has ruddy hair, bright eyes, and a beautiful countenance. "Arise, anoint him, for this is he," whispers the Spirit in the ears of Samuel; and, in the midst of his brethren, both to his own surprise and theirs, David is anointed king of Israel, and receives from that day the Spirit of the Lord.* Thus is the boy "taken from the sheep-folds, from following the ewes great with young, to feed Israel according to the integrity of his heart, and to guide them by the skilfulness of his hands."†

It is probable, however, that the prophet did not explain to the company the meaning of this act; and it appears from 1 Samuel xvii. 15 that David returned to his shepherd-life in the pasture-lands of Bethlehem. The time when he should exchange the crook for the sceptre had

* 1 Samuel xvi. 1—13.

† Psalm lxxviii. 70—72.

not yet come ; and he must first pass through a long course of trial, and thus prove himself worthy of the honours that awaited him. How he did this is seen in the story of his life. Faithful to his duty, and fearless of all dangers, when a lion had one day taken a lamb from the flock, he rushed after him and slew him ; and, on another occasion, when a bear was the aggressor, he acted with the same heroism, and slew him also. The Philistines had appeared in full force against the Israelites, and Goliath of Gath was proudly bidding defiance to the armies of the living God, when the stripling goes to Saul the king, and offers to accept the giant's challenge. How does he encounter him ? He takes from the stream that runs through the valley five smooth stones, which he puts into his wallet, and, with a sling in his hand, which he well knows how to use, he advances to the charge. Nothing daunted by the champion's threats, David says, "Thou comest to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a shield : but I come to thee in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom thou hast defied ;" and then, taking a stone out of his wallet, he slings it, and it enters the forehead of his foe. (1 Samuel xvii. 45, &c.) O how Bethlehem and the neighbourhood rang with the praises of the youth that day ! As he returned from the field the women came out of

all the cities of Israel with tabrets and stringed instruments, and, as they played, they sang, "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands."

We hear little more of Bethlehem in connection with David's history until he had been for some time established on the throne. It had fallen into the hands of the Philistines, and they had placed a garrison in it, or, as the narrative implies, just at the entrance of it, a larger army being encamped in the valley of Rephaim, which extended nearly to the city of Jerusalem. David, with several of his warriors, was in the cave of Adullam, which was situated at the base of the mountains of Judæa two hours south-east of Bethlehem, when, fatigued and thirsty, he said, "O that one would give me drink of the well of Bethlehem, which is by the gate!" Travellers tell us that a little north of the eastern corner of the hill of Bethlehem there is an ancient cistern still called by the inhabitants "*Bir-David*," or "David's fountain," the water of which is very sweet, and may have possessed peculiar properties. The king's desire was heard; and three of his mighty men instantly left the cave, rushed through the host of the Philistines, and, probably in their waterskins, took water from the well, and returned with it to the cave. But David saw, perhaps by the blood upon their garments, that they had

obtained it at the peril of their lives; and though it would have refreshed him greatly, yet such was his magnanimity, that he would not drink it, but poured it out as a libation unto the Lord.*

Among the friends of David in his deepest sorrow, occasioned by the revolt of his own son Absalom, was a Gileadite named Barzillai, who, together with Shobi and Machir, brought refreshments to Mahanaim for the king and his people to eat. This kindness was not forgotten; and when, after Absalom's death, he went over the Jordan to conduct the king back, the king proposed that he should go and reside with him in Jerusalem, promising that he would nourish him there. But Barzillai was an aged man, "even fourscore years old," and, feeling that he had not long to live, gracefully declined the honour, but offered his son Chimham to David to go with him to Jerusalem in his stead.† The young man went; and David loved him, and appears to have bestowed upon him a house in Bethlehem, which, in later times, was called the khan, or caravanserai, of Chimham.‡ A recent traveller supposes that this house was none other than that of Boaz and Ruth, and consequently the home of Jesse, and of David

* 2 Sam. xxiii. 14—17; 1 Chron. xi. 15—19.

† 2 Sam. xvii. 27—29; xix. 31—37; 1 Kings ii. 7.

‡ Jer. xli. 17.

himself; that Chimham, by the possession of it, became the sheikh of Bethlehem; and that it was identical with "the inn," or khan, mentioned by St. Luke, in which there was no room for Mary on her arrival in the town.* It is not improbable, and we shall refer to the thought again. But whether the conjecture be true or not, the khan of Chimham was of some importance; for in the days of the prophet Jeremiah, it afforded a resting-place to Johanan and those who were with him, including Jeremiah, when they had conquered Ishmael the son of Nethaniah. For "they departed, and dwelt in the habitation of Chimham, which is by Bethlehem, to go to enter into Egypt."

Such is Bethlehem's history in the pages of the Old Testament. It gave birth to Obed, to Jesse, and to David; but it was to be distinguished above every other city of Judæa by being made the birth-place of David's Son and Lord. Its name signifies "the house of bread;" and He who was "the Bread of life" was there to make His entrance into the world. It was called also Ephratah, or "the field of fruit;" and "the Branch of the Lord" and the "true Vine" was first to spring up there, to the rejoicing of many hearts.

"Bethlehem hath open'd Eden:
Come! let us behold.

* "The Holy Land," by Hepworth Dixon, vol. i.

Sweetness we have found, once hidden ;
Pearl of price untold :
Gifts of Paradise all precious,
Stored within the Cave, refresh us.

“There the’ unwater’d Root appearing
Blooms in Pardon free :
Christians, enter, nothing fearing,
And the wonder see ;
There the undug Well behold
David thirsted for of old.

“Now the *Maid*, her Infant bearing,
Hasten we to greet :
He ere worlds the Godhead sharing,
Little CHILD so sweet !
Born within this lowly place,
Stays the thirst of Adam’s race.”

LYRA MESSIANICA.



CHAPTER IV.



THE NATIVITY OF THE HOLY CHILD.

AUGUSTUS CÆSAR now wore the imperial purple, and Herod the Great reigned over Galilee, Judæa, and Cœle-Syria. By a special mandate of the Roman senate, the former had been designated "the Father of his country;" and, for the third time, he had closed the temple of Janus, as an indication of the fact that the world was then at peace. The latter, who belonged to an Idumæan family, and was the second son of Antipater, the procurator of Judæa under Julius Cæsar, had risen to power by several remarkable steps. At the age of twenty-five, (B. c. 47,) he was made governor of Galilee, and, a little later, of Cœle-Syria; and in the thirty-first year of his age, (B. c. 41,) he became joint tetrarch, with his brother Phasael, of Judæa. On the invasion of that province by the Parthians, he was compelled to fly to Rome; whence, however, he returned with a considerable army, (B. c. 37,) recaptured Jerusalem, and

established his authority over the greater part of Palestine. Herod, therefore, though still subject to Rome, was, at this period, king of the three provinces of which Palestine was chiefly composed.

He had now reigned thirty-four years ; during which period he had rebuilt the temple at Jerusalem on a scale of great magnificence, had erected a very splendid temple at Samaria, had founded the city of Cæsarea, and had introduced heathen games, not only into this latter city, but even into Jerusalem itself. He professed the religion of the Jews, yet he persecuted the Rabbis unto death ; he was anxious to gain the approbation of the people, yet he secretly co-operated with their bitterest enemies. His policy, doubtless, was to throw off the yoke of Rome, and to make Judæa an independent kingdom : but in this he failed ; for Augustus, having heard of his proceedings, and especially of his having led an army into Arabia, wrote to him sharply, saying that, “whereas he had formerly treated him as a friend, he should hereafter treat him as a subject.” From that moment the hopes of Herod were cut off, and he must have felt that there was no probability of his ever being able to rid himself of Cæsar’s power. A king he was, but he was a *king under authority* ; and Augustus might, at any time, deprive him of his crown.

At this juncture a decree was issued by the

Emperor, ordering an enrolment of his subjects with a view to a new taxation of the empire. "It came to pass in those days," says St. Luke, "that there went out a decree from Cæsar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed." The word thus rendered "taxed" signifies, however, *enrolled*; and means not that the taxes were to be paid immediately, but that the names of the people were to be registered, and an account taken of their property, with the intention of levying upon it a rate to meet the expenses of the government. But was this an enrolment of the inhabitants of Palestine only, or did it include the whole of the Roman empire? There can be little doubt that the expression "all the world" —*πάσαν τὴν οἰκουμένην*—signifies the latter; and though there may be no direct proof, from secular historians, that Augustus ever issued such a decree as is here implied, yet it is well known that, from the commencement of the rule of the Cæsars, attempts were made to introduce a uniform system of taxation throughout the empire, and there is every reason to suppose that Augustus was intent upon this object.

But a chronological difficulty arises here. St. Luke goes on to say, "And this enrolment was first made when Quirinus was governor of Syria." It has been frequently affirmed that this statement cannot be correct; for, though a census was taken when Quirinus was governor of

Syria, he did not enter upon that office until after the banishment of Archelaus, or about ten years subsequent to the year of our Saviour's birth. Publius Sulpicius Quirinus was born at Lanuvium, in Italy, was made consul B.C. 12, A.U.C. 742, and was sent into Syria in A.D. 6, to make an enrolment of the people's property, and to sell the house of Archelaus.* But our Lord was born before the death of Herod, an event which occurred B.C. 4, and therefore, as observed above, ten years before Quirinus entered on this office. Several explanations of this difficulty have been offered. Von Gumpach reads the passage in St. Luke, "This, the first Roman assessment, was carried into effect when Quirinus was governor of Syria;" and he observes, "What St. Luke manifestly intends," by the parenthesis, "is to prevent a misconception as to the true epoch of our Lord's birth; and, with this view, he reminds his readers, that the assessment for the first Roman taxation of the Jewish people was made a considerable time previously to its being carried into execution." This, substantially, is the view taken by Ebrard; but the objection to it is, that, in this case, it would not have been necessary for the people to set out on the journey at this time to have themselves enrolled, as St. Luke informs us that they did. May we then take the word *πρώτη*, rendered "first," in a com-

* Josephus, "Antiquities," xvii. 13, 5.

parative sense, and translate, with Wieseler and others, "This enrolment was made *before* the well-known one when Quirinus was governor of Syria?" Neither is this solution perfectly satisfactory, though several examples of such a use of the word have been adduced. Must we, after all, conclude that St. Luke was guilty of a chronological error; that he confounded an assessment made by Herod with a much later one made under Quirinus? This is altogether incredible; for he himself has mentioned a reference made by Gamaliel to the later *taxing*, (Acts v. 37,) whence it is natural to conclude that he was acquainted with it, and could not have confounded the two events. There is another mode of explaining the difficulty, which, though summarily rejected by all who are determined not to accept St. Luke as an authority, has been adopted by some of the best scholars of the age. It has been all but demonstrated by Aug. W. Zumpt, that Quirinus was *twice* governor of Syria. According to him, the governors of Syria were,—(1.) Sentius Saturninus, from B.C. 9 to 6. (2.) Quintilius Varus, from B.C. 6 to 4. (3.) Publius Sulpicius Quirinus, probably towards the end of B.C. 4, remaining about three years, during which period he reduced the Homonadenses of Cilicia. (4.) M. Lollius, from B.C. 1 to A.D. 2. (5.) Caius Marcius Censorinus, A.D. 3. (6.) L. V. Saturninus, A.D. 4. (7.) P. S. Quirinus,

the second time, A.D. 6 to A.D. 11. Now, if this is the fact, we have no need to go further. St. Luke is right, and criticism may save itself any further trouble.* And does not this discovery prove the folly of those who hastily assume the inaccuracy of the Sacred Writers? It ought, at least, to induce them to pause ere they condemn; for it is far more likely that they may be wrong, than that such a careful investigator as St. Luke was in error. But if men are determined to find inaccuracies in the Bible, find them they will, whether they are there or not.

The decree thus issued was itself Roman, but the form in which it was carried out would necessarily be Herodian or Jewish. Imperial law would have allowed Joseph to be enrolled at Nazareth, where he resided: but the customs of the Jews required that every one should be enrolled in his own city; and hence Joseph must repair to Bethlehem, as being "of the house and lineage of David." But why did the Virgin accompany him on the journey? Why must she, in her delicate position, be compelled to leave the quietude of her home in Nazareth at this particular time? It has been supposed

* A summary of the arguments of Zumpt will be found in a note by the translator of Wieseler's "Synopsis," p. 129, 2d edition. Mr. Westcott, in his valuable "Introduction to the Study of the Gospels," says that no one, after Zumpt's Essay, can doubt that Quirinus was governor of Syria at the time of our Lord's birth, as well as ten years afterwards. P. 291, note.

that she was bound to appear in Bethlehem, because she was an heiress of real property in that city: but of this there is little probability; and far more likely is the supposition, that Joseph was unwilling to leave her at Nazareth without his protection, or that she went knowing what would certainly take place, and knowing that prophecy marked out Bethlehem as the birth-place of the promised Christ. Had she not read the prophet Micah? And did she not believe the angel's words? It was not only natural that she should wish to accompany her protector; but perfectly in accordance with her faith in God, that she should go to Bethlehem, expecting to bring forth her son in that city. Accordingly, St. Luke appears to intimate that this was the reason why she went; and perhaps she would see in the decree that rendered the journey on Joseph's part necessary another proof of the wonder-working power of God, who in this way was about to accomplish the purposes of His will.

Joseph and Mary would, in all probability, set out on their journey from Nazareth in company with others who were going, some, perhaps, to Bethlehem, others to Jerusalem or elsewhere; and the road would, no doubt, be filled with travellers hastening to their respective cities in compliance with the emperor's decree. But this devout pair would probably shun observa-

tion, rather than court it ; and the greater part of the journey would be performed with few, if any, attendants. If they took the most direct route to Bethlehem, their path would lie across the great plain of Esdraelon, and in six or eight hours they would reach Jenîn, the En-gannim of the Old Testament, where they would probably tarry for the night. The following day they would take one of the roads leading to Sychar, by Sebaste, and would pass within sight of that city, if they did not enter it. It was the city recently built by Herod ; of whom Josephus says, that " he enclosed a town with a superb wall twenty furlongs in length ; and introduced into it six thousand colonists, to whom he assigned an extremely fertile tract. In the centre of the buildings he erected a temple to Cæsar, of very large dimensions ; and, having laid around it a furlong and a half of consecrated ground, he named the city Sebaste, and bestowed on its inhabitants an enviable character."* Scarcely would this city be a fit resting-place for the humble travellers ; and hence they would pursue their way to Sychar, halting, perhaps, by the well of Jacob, which they would reach from Jenîn in eight or nine hours. From Sychar to Jerusalem the distance is eleven hours and twenty-five minutes, or about eight-and-twenty miles : but Joseph

* Traill's "Josephus : Wars," chap. xxi.

would take care to travel slowly ; and, perhaps, about the evening of the third day he would enter the city, with his precious charge, at the Damascus gate, and there remain until the morning. An easy journey of two miles would bring them, the next day, to Bethlehem, the little city to which they both, as descendants of the house of David, belonged.

But the Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans ; and many of them, to avoid passing through Samaria, took another path, through Peræa on the east side of the Jordan. We can scarcely think, however, that Joseph would give way to such a prejudice, and take Mary by so circuitous a route as that. No ; he would probably take the direct road above indicated ; and whilst Mary rode upon an ass, he would walk by her side, never, we may be sure, leaving her to the care of others, because feeling that he was bound to her by the most sacred ties.

They arrived in Bethlehem. But many had reached the city before them, and the inn, or khan, where travellers sought accommodation, was full. Dean Alford says, "Of what sort this inn was, does not appear ;" but it is highly probable that it was a caravanserai similar in character to those still existing in the East. And what are they ? Not inns in our sense of the term ; for no such places are to be found in eastern lands. The better kind of khan is a

large and durable edifice, usually square, the centre of which is a paved quadrangular court, in which springs a fountain of water, and around which are chambers on the first floor, and over them a wooden gallery which runs round the entire court, access to which is gained by a staircase outside. The traveller enters through a porch, takes one or two of the chambers, or arched compartments of the building, in which he bestows the goods he has for sale, and also obtains the use of some of the smaller rooms which run by the side of the wooden gallery above.*

Now, as we have already seen, there was a khan near to Bethlehem in the days of Jeremiah, called after the name of Chimham, the son of Barzillai; and it is not improbable that it still existed, though it may have undergone many changes in the lapse of years. And if it was originally David's property, who had so great a right to be accommodated in it as Joseph and his wife, who belonged to David's line? But they were now in obscure life; and the chambers in the khan being all occupied, no room could be found in it for them. Had they been in affluent circumstances, and had they come with a large train of attendants, some of the occupants of the inn would probably have made way for them,

* See Stewart's "The Tent and the Khan," p. 478; Loftus's "Chaldea," p. 13; Dixon's "Holy Land," vol. i., p. 154, &c.

and the very best apartments of the khan would have been vacated for their convenience; but, as it was, no one cared for them, no one was disposed to afford them accommodation.

An emblem this of the treatment which the Saviour often meets with still. For Him, the Lord of Glory, there is often no room in the inn, —in the palace, in the best building of the city; yet for Him there ought to be room everywhere: and every mansion, every cottage, every heart, should bid Him welcome, and rejoice to receive Him as a guest. And though now exalted to the right hand of God, He deigns to come wherever He is invited, and will light up every home He enters with His smile and love.

We may well conceive that Joseph would feel anxious respecting his wife; yet, knowing that she was about to give birth to the Messiah, his confidence in God would not be shaken, and he repaired with her to the stable, as the best and only lodging which could be found. Painters have represented this stable after the model of buildings of the class in western countries; but it was probably the stable connected with the khan, which, according to Dr. Kitto, would be “a covered avenue extending between the back wall of the lodging-apartment, and the outer walls of the whole building.” Tradition fixes upon a cave or grotto as the actual birth-place of our Lord. Justin Martyr, who lived in

the second century, affirms that Jesus was born in a cave very near to the town; and in the fourth century Helena, the mother of Constantine the Great, erected over this cave a basilica or church, which, according to Dr. Robinson, was the same that now exists. "It is situated," says Dr. Olin, "at the western end of the town, and is by far the most conspicuous object which it contains. The whole has the appearance of a strong fortress. There is a large but waste esplanade in front, extending westward towards the village, and from the wing of the convent which projects a long way in advance before the entrance, and bounds the southern side of the court, to the northern declivity of the ridge."* The church itself is "a magnificent structure, though now in a neglected or semi-ruinous state. It is thirty-four paces long and thirty broad, ornamented with forty-eight monolith columns of the Corinthian order, arranged in four rows of twelve columns each." All that remains of the basilica built by Helena is, however, the nave of the church; which is therefore, in all probability, the most ancient monument of Christian architecture in the world.

This nave covers what is called the Grotto of the Nativity, which is approached by a flight of marble steps, and consists of "an irregular chapel, dimly lighted up with silver lamps, and

* Olin's "Travels," vol. ii., p. 93.

containing two small recesses nearly opposite each other.”* One of these is said to be the exact spot of the nativity; and over it is a large star, formed of silver and precious stones, around which are inscribed the words, “*Hic de Virgine Maria Christus natus est.*” Vast sums of money must have been expended here, and not quite uselessly; for whether these buildings cover the true site of the nativity or not, they have borne their testimony to succeeding ages of the early triumphs of Christianity, and have led many weary pilgrims to *think* of Jesus as the Saviour of the world, and possibly to trust in Him.

But is this tradition worthy of acceptance? Dr. Wilson and many other travellers have expressed their doubts; but Mr. Hepworth Dixon says, “The cave is still a natural opening in the rock; a grotto hollowed out of the soft limestone, like a hundred others to be found within a dozen miles of the church. Take away this roof of English oak, remove this front of Syrian marble, and the grotto would have all the appearance of a common cave, its mouth opening towards the Shepherds’ Tower and the fields of Ruth. As the shepherds came up the hill-side, they would be able to see the lamp burning in the entrance of the cave.”

In a stable, then, Mary “brought forth her first-born son, and wrapped him in swaddling

* Stanley’s “Sinai and Palestine,” p. 435.

clothes, and laid him in a manger." Few are the words which record this wondrous birth; yet the grandeur of the event is beyond all human thought.

"O sight of strange surprise,
That fills our gazing eyes;
A manger coldly strew'd,
And swaddling bands so rude,
A bearing mother poor, and child that helpless lies !

"Art Thou, O wondrous sight,
Of lights the very Light;
Who holdest in Thy hand
The sky, and sea, and land,
Who than the glorious heavens art more exceeding
bright?"

Yes; that infant Child, thus ushered into the world in the very lowliest way, was none other than the Christ of whom prophets had spoken and psalmists sung. "He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: He hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him." How remarkably was this prediction of Isaiah fulfilled! Not like a stately cedar did the Messiah first appear, but like a feeble branch or sprout; yet he *grew up* before the Lord, known, watched over, and preserved by Him from the stable to the cross. "Before the eyes of men, who are not able to

penetrate to the substance through the appearance, He is concealed: but God beholds Him; beholds His concealed glory; beholds His high destination; and because He beholds, He also takes care, and prepares His transition from lowliness to glory.* What was that substance which the eyes of men could not discern? It was the Divine nature; it was the eternal and ever-blessed God. The Word was made flesh; Deity allied Himself with humanity; the co-equal Son of God tabernacled in the form of an infant. For, not at the baptism of Christ did the Logos first take up his abode in His human body, as some have strangely taught; but from His conception Jesus was the God-Man; and, as He lay in the manger, He received the homage of angelic hosts. "When He bringeth forth His First-Begotten into the world, He saith, And let all the angels of God worship Him."

About five hundred years before the birth of Christ a system of religion had been developed in the East which represented Vishnu as an avatar or incarnation of Brahma; the Tri-unity or Trinity of Hindooism consisting of Brahm, Vishnu, and Siva. Hence it has been affirmed, that the idea of an Incarnation of Deity is not peculiar to Christianity; and that the story of the birth of the Son of God is nothing more than a myth, founded upon religious ideas which had

* Hengstenberg's "Christology," vol. ii., p. 277.

their origin in Hindoostan ! "But it is easy to see," as Dr. Dorner observes, "that it is not by reference to the Indian religion that the Christian ground-idea is to be explained. For the incarnation in human form of Vishnu is no true assumption of humanity, as is sufficiently evinced by the plurality of the incarnations in the most diverse forms. The essential unity of the Divine and the human, which the church recognises as for ever complete in Christ, does not appear in Chrishna ; for Chrishna returns to his heaven, and lays aside again his humanity."* According to the Hindoo mythology, there have been nine avatars of Vishnu, and a tenth is yet to take place. One of them was an incarnation into a fish, another into a turtle, another into a bear, the sixth was into an heroic man, the ninth was into a tree, and the tenth will be into a horse. Need we go further to refute the notion, that the Christian idea of God manifested in the flesh had any connection with such absurdities as these ? Rationalists may adopt this view in order to account for the rise of Christianity ; but they thereby rush into a region dark and black as night, where not a ray of light appears to guide their steps.

We cling, then, and shall for ever cling to the doctrine of the New Testament ; and though we do not pretend to be able to explain the

* "Person of Christ," vol. i., p. 7, Clark.

mystery, that mystery we still believe,—that the Son of God became the Son of man; took our humanity into an indissoluble union with His Divine Person, and was made in all things like unto us, sin only excepted: and “in reference to this unspeakable and inconceivable mystery, we must believe more than we reason, adore more than we define, think more than we investigate, love more than we know, humble ourselves more than we speak.”* “The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the Only Begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.” (John i. 14.)

Many attempts have been made to fix the precise date of the nativity of Christ; but, though we may approximate to the time, yet we find differences of opinion as to the actual day among the ablest scholars. We should naturally suppose that the year was A.D. 1, and that it is now 1868 years since the great event took place; but we are told, in the margin of the second chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel, that it occurred in the fourth year before the account called “Anno Domini,” in which case it is now 1872 years since it occurred. And this date is undoubtedly correct; for it is certain, from Matthew ii. 19, that Jesus was born but a short time before the death of Herod the Great. But Herod died in

* *Quæstel on the Gospels.*

the year A.U. 750, or B.C. 4; for Josephus tells us that, on the very night on which an eclipse of the moon took place, he deprived Matthias of the high-priesthood, and burnt alive another Matthias, with his companions in rebellion, and that he died himself a few days after.* Now it has been ascertained from the astronomical tables, that an eclipse of the moon, visible in Jerusalem, took place in the night between the 12th and 13th of March of that year; so that the death of Herod must have taken place early in the following month, probably about the 2d of April, or Nisan. It almost necessarily follows that Jesus was not born later than the month of March, nor earlier than the month of February; and, after pursuing several lines of argument on the question, Wieseler says, "The result of our investigation as to the exact date of our Lord's birth is as follows:—That the day cannot now be determined at all; while, as regards the months, our choice lies between the close of December, January, and February, of which, however, December is the least probable, January more so, and February decidedly the most probable of all." In this conclusion, which has been accepted by Bishop Ellicott, and many other

* "Antiq.," xviii. 10, 6; xvii. 8, 4. Comp. Wieseler's "Synopsis," pp. 50, 51. It has been rendered highly probable that the Matthias who was burnt alive was identical with the Theudas of Acts v. 36. See Wieseler, pp. 90, 91.

writers, we may safely rest; and, as we shall hereafter see, it harmonises with other events connected with the history of our Saviour's early life.



CHAPTER V.



THE SHEPHERDS OF BETHLEHEM AND THE HOLY CHILD.

“**A**S the flower must be surrounded by its garland of leaves, and Adam by his paradise, so was the birth of Christ, the bodily manifestation of the Gospel, surrounded by a circle of inspired dispositions and revelations, or reflexes of the Gospel. The centre in which the union of Divinity with humanity took place spread around it a great vibration through the mental world; the birth of the Messiah was that heavenly note which called forth wondrous responsive echoes from every Messianically disposed heart.”*

Among the “Messianically disposed hearts” were certain shepherds who, in the neighbourhood of Bethlehem, were “keeping watch over their flocks by night.” From the days of David, and probably from an earlier period, flocks had been watched in that part of Judæa in like

* Lange’s “Life of Jesus,” vol. i., p. 385, Clark.

manner; and travellers tell us that they are seen there to this day, and that the shepherd-boy is heard singing to his sheep beneath a sky lit up by a thousand brilliant stars. We have, then, here a beautiful picture of real life; and the facts which the Gospel narrative unfolds convey some of the most impressive lessons to which our attention can be given.

We have already seen that the birth of Jesus probably took place in the month of February; which, though cold in Palestine, would be sufficiently mild for shepherds and their flocks to spend the night in the open air. The employment of a shepherd, though highly honourable, was, nevertheless, somewhat lowly; and it is probable that these shepherds belonged to the poorer class of society in Judæa, and were in no way persons of reputation and renown. But it was quite in keeping with the design for which Christ came into the world, that His birth should be announced to them rather than to the wise and great; for He came to preach the Gospel to the poor, to be the Shepherd of such as are poor in spirit, and to make all men friends and brethren, of one family and of one fold. Had He come in pomp and majesty, to erect an earthly kingdom which should attract by its splendour the princes and potentates of the earth, His advent would have been proclaimed in the court of Herod, or to the Sanhedrim of

the Jewish nation; but, seeing that His kingdom was to be a purely spiritual one, neither Herod nor the Sanhedrim were favoured with the news, which, indeed, had it been sent to them, they might have treated with contempt. Yet was it not humiliating to the national pride, that their great men should be passed by, and the birth of the Messiah announced to none but a few humble shepherds? Doubtless it was; but the rulers of the people were at this time so degenerate, that it was impossible for the heavenly messengers to have made such communications to them. "The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him;" and only to minds which would give "responsive echoes" to the tidings were these tidings sent.

For that these shepherds were pious persons none can entertain a doubt. They belonged to the comparatively few of that day who were "waiting for the consolation of Israel;" and perhaps they were conversing together, as they sat and watched their flocks, on the events which had already taken place in connection with the birth of the son of Zacharias and Elizabeth, and were wondering what these things meant, and what other great event was about to happen in the land. For, though shepherds, they were not unacquainted with the prophecies of Isaiah. They had doubtless read or heard such passages as

these : "Unto us a Child is born ;"* "And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots,"†—with others of a similar kind : and they were perhaps anticipating, with holy hope, the advent of the Deliverer who had so long been promised. Hence they were in a state of mind admirably fitted for the reception of the angel's message ; whilst, as Bishop Andrewes quaintly observes, "it well agreed to tell shepherds of the yearning of a strange Lamb, such a Lamb as should 'take away the sin of the world ;'‡ such a Lamb as they might 'send to the Ruler of the world' for a present;§ (*Mitte Agnum Dominatori terræ ;*) Esay's Lamb. Or, if ye will, to tell shepherds of the birth of a Shepherd, Ezekiel's Shepherd : *Ecce suscitabo vobis Pastorem*,' 'Behold, I will raise you a Shepherd ;' 'the Chief Shepherd ;' 'the Great Shepherd ;' and 'the Good Shepherd that gave His life for His flock.'|| And so it was not unfit news for the persons to whom it came."¶

The path of duty is not only the path of safety, but of blessing. Whilst these shepherds were employed in their wonted occupation,—“were keeping watch over their flocks by night,”—they received the joyful intelligence of the

* Isaiah ix. 6. † Isaiah xi. 1. ‡ John i. 29.

§ Isaiah xvi. 1.

|| Ezek. xxxiv. 23 ; 1 Pet. v. 4 ; Heb. xiii. 20 ; John x. 11.

¶ "Sermons," vol. i., p. 65.

Saviour's birth. The attachment of a Syrian shepherd to his flocks was such that he would imperil his own life, as David did, to snatch even a lamb from the mouth of a lion or a bear; and when one was lost in the wilderness, would climb the most rugged mountain, or ascend the steepest rocks, that he might bring it home: and these shepherds thought it no hardship to tend their flocks in the night season: so that they may be considered types—though feeble ones—of Him who now came to be the True Shepherd, and of whom it was said, “He shall feed His flock like a shepherd: He shall gather the lambs with His arms, and shall gently lead those that are with young.” O favoured shepherds! to be the recipients of such tidings as those now brought by the heavenly messenger. Well might they have been envied by the kings and princes of the earth!

For there came upon them suddenly, or stood before them, the angel of the Lord, and “the glory of the Lord shone round about them.” It was night, and the stars were glittering brightly in the heavens; but now their brightness is eclipsed by the splendour which surrounds the person of the angel. Whether this angel was Gabriel or some other, we are not informed; but, belonging to the heavenly hierarchy, and coming upon the shepherds suddenly, without the sound of footsteps, yet radiant as the sun

when he issueth out of his chamber, he filled them with fear and consternation; which, however, his words speedily allayed. That they were afraid, is not surprising; for how can "dim eyes of flesh" bear to look upon the glory which surrounds celestial beings? They were not the only persons who were afraid under such circumstances. Mary and Zacharias were troubled at the appearance of a heavenly messenger; and it would have been strange had not the shepherds been afraid. But their fears were not those of an evil conscience. They arose from the natural inability of man to bear any manifestations, however mild, of the glory which invests the inhabitants of the spirit-world. Hence they subsided when the angel spoke. For what did he say? His first words were, "Fear not;" for it was necessary to allay their apprehensions at once, inasmuch as an agitated mind is not prepared to listen to important news. And these words were followed by others still sweeter and more consolatory: "For, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all the people." When Jacob received intelligence that his son Joseph was yet alive, he said, "It is enough;" and when David was in deep distress, he said, "Make me to hear joy and gladness, that the bones which Thou hast broken may rejoice." No wonder, then, that the shepherds were counselled to

dismiss their fears; for the news which came to them was indeed glad tidings, not merely of hope that the Redeemer should appear hereafter,—such tidings as the Jews had often heard from the lips of their ancient prophets,—but of joy that He had already come. There is joy at the birth of an ordinary child, but more at the birth of a prince or heir. Let one be born of royal parents, in the line of succession to the crown, and a whole nation rings with jubilee, and the tidings are circulated far and wide. But He who was this day born was the Lord of all,—the Son of David and the Son of God,—the Light and Hope of a dark and perishing world.

But the joy connected with the Redeemer's advent was not to be limited to the shepherds, but to reach to all the people. It was the joy predicted by the prophet Isaiah when he said, "Thou hast multiplied the nation, and hast increased to him the joy; they joy before Thee according to the joy of harvest, and as men rejoice when they divide the spoil."* It was the joy of those who gather in the waving corn,—the joy of those who return from the battle-field bearing the palm of victory,—a general joy in which every one feels he has an interest, and of which every one claims a share. Our authorized version omits the article, and reads, "to all people;" and, whether this be grammatically correct

* Isaiah ix. 3, margin.

or not, we know that these tidings were to circulate among all nations: whence it was said, "Rejoice, ye Gentiles, with His people."* The angels' message was to us Gentiles,—to us who "sat in darkness and the shadow of death,"—and not to the people of one generation only, but to all people of every succeeding age and in every portion of the globe. It has come down the stream of nineteen centuries, and each Christmas-day it is as joyous and as soul-reviving as when it was first proclaimed; for the angel whom St. John saw in the Apocalyptic vision, having the everlasting Gospel to preach unto all nations, fulfils the same office as the angel of St. Luke who brought this Gospel to the shepherds of the plain. O, then, let the tidings spread! Never did the world need them more than now. They are the one and only panacea for its innumerable miseries and woes. Speed on your errand, ye heralds of the Cross! Haste, ye missionaries of the truth, to every land! Fly, O fly, ye ambassadors of light, to every nation, and to every tribe! To your trust are committed these tidings of great joy, and by you they must be spread to the uttermost bounds of the earth.

This, however, was but the prelude to the message. The angel proceeded to say, "For unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this

* Rom. xv. 10.

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shall be a sign unto you : Ye shall find the Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger." The prophet Micah had said, " And thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall He come forth unto Me that shall be Ruler in Israel." (Micah v. 2.) And now this is the city—the city of David—the city near which the shepherds themselves probably dwelt, that is named by the angel as the birth-place of the Child Jesus. And this Child is proclaimed to them as a Saviour, Christ the Lord. Were not these indeed glad tidings of great joy ? Can any news be more welcome than that a physician is found, who can heal all diseases ? or that a conqueror is near, who can set free all captives ? or that a Redeemer appears, who can forgive all sin and cancel all transgression ? But all this was the new-born Babe to be ; a Saviour from sin and all its consequences,—an anointed Saviour, the Christ of God, the Shiloh of Jacob, the Immanuel of Isaiah, the Branch of Jeremiah, the Messiah of Daniel. On Him the holy anointing oil was to be poured more richly than on Aaron the high priest, or Samuel the prophet, or David the king ; for He was to be a priest like unto Melchisedec, a prophet like unto Moses, and a king whose emphatic name should be Jehovah-Tsidkenu—" the Lord our Righteousness." The addition of the word Lord was strikingly significant. This anointed Saviour was

to be "a Ruler in Israel," a Priest-King upon His throne; and now, already, was another prophecy about to be fulfilled, "Yet have I set My King upon My holy hill of Zion. I will declare the decree: the Lord hath said unto Me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten Thee." (Psa. ii. 6, 7.) These shepherds had heard of Herod,—of his tyranny, of his pride, of his power, and of his cruelty; and they had perhaps longed for the advent of a king who should rule in righteousness,—of a shepherd-king, whose sceptre should be mild, though firm; and now the tidings come to them that such a king is born, and born *to them*. Isaiah had said, "Unto *us* a Child is born; unto *us* a Son is given:" (Isa. ix. 6:) the angel said, "*Unto you* is born a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord." That angels are indirectly benefited by the incarnation of the Son of God, there is ground to believe; for, as St. Paul says, "unto the principalities and powers in the heavenly places" is made "known by the Church the manifold wisdom of God:" (Ephes. iii. 10 :) but not to angels was the Saviour born, not to angels was the Redeemer sent. He came "to seek that which was lost." He came to restore those who had gone astray. And in making this announcement to the shepherds, the angel intimated that they individually were the objects of the Divine regard. "There is something indescribably Divine and touching in the care of God to satisfy the secret yearning of individuals,

at the same moment when He is occupying Himself with the eternal salvation of millions. Man overlooks the masses in the individual, or neglects the individual in the masses; God equally comprehends the interests of both in His arrangements.”*

They asked for no sign, yet the angel gave them one. But what a sign! The shepherds were to go to Bethlehem; and there, not in the caravanseraï or inn, but in the manger of a lowly stable, they would find the Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, such as new-born infants were usually nursed in with care.† It has been supposed that the manger was their own, or one with which they were perfectly familiar; and this was the sign, that they should find the Babe in such a cradle, rather than in one of ivory or gold. But to them even this was part of the glad tidings, for it assured them that they would easily find access to the Saviour; whereas had He been born amidst the splendour of a palace, or even amidst the crowd that occupied the inn, they would perhaps have been forbidden to approach the spot. The sign, then, was most acceptable; for, as Stier observes, it was like saying to these humble shepherds, “You may approach this King: He is not come in worldly pomp and splendour.”

* Oosterzee in Lange’s “Commentary,” in loco, Clark.

† Wisdom of Solomon, vii. 4; Ezek. xvi. 4.

Suddenly and unexpectedly an anthem of praise now bursts upon their ears; for with the angel there appeared a multitude of the heavenly host, celebrating in such strains as mortals never before heard this glorious event. *One* angel, who probably stood on the ground before the shepherds, made the announcement to them of the fact; now a multitude of angels—or the whole multitude of the angels, as some suppose the evangelist to mean—filled the expanse of heaven with their melodious song. Thus the ladder of Jacob was again set up, and thus did the sons of light minister to a company of the sons of earth. “As a type, this phenomenon,” says Olshausen truly, “contains the realization of the kingdom of God, which involves the idea of things celestial in union with things terrestrial.”

The song of the angel-choir has been the subject of much needless criticism, into which we shall not attempt to enter. It consists, as Alford observes, of “three clauses, forming a Hebrew parallelism, in which the third clause is subordinate to, and an amplification of, the second, and so is without a copula to it.” Thus it stands,—

“Glory in the highest to God,
And upon earth peace,
In men good-will.”

And we may understand either **THERE IS**, or

LET THERE BE ; and thus, as Nitsch observes, "this song rises up to the glory of God, comes down again to proffer peace to earth, and rests with good-will on men." The last clause is rendered by the Vulgate, "to men of good-will ;" a reading which Keble has followed in his beautiful Christmas hymn, but which is of little authority, and destroys the parallelism. And, indeed, the good-will or favour of God was now manifested to all men ; for now was heard the proclamation of peace, and now God was to be glorified in the restoration to Himself of all who would accept the new-born King.*

The heavenly beings returned to their heavenly abode ; and then the shepherds said one to another, "Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us." And now, full of faith and full of joy, these first pilgrims to Bethlehem leave, for awhile, their flocks upon the plain, as if assured that no foe would injure them ; and proceed to the city of David, comparatively nigh at hand. They came, it is said, "with haste ;" for they longed to see the infant Saviour, and to present to Him the homage of their hearts. Not long had they to seek. "They found Mary, and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger ;" and we may be sure that they bowed before that

* Comp. Col. i. 19, 20.

Babe with holy thankfulness and praise. They had no gifts to offer, as the Eastern Magi had ; but they gave to Him themselves, as the first-fruits of a plenteous harvest of the poor, made rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom of God. We almost wonder why the evangelist did not tell us more of what occurred, of what the shepherds did and said, of the conversation that took place between them and the parents of the Holy Child ; but he omits, after the manner of inspired writers, much that an ordinary writer would probably have given. We may be sure, however, that the shepherds told Joseph and Mary of the angels' visit ; and Mary would exult in the thought that, whilst her Son was ushered into the world in a lowly stable, His birth was celebrated by angelic hosts.

But how did the shepherds act ? Perhaps, with the dawning of the day, they went forth into the town, and published to others the glad tidings they had heard. For "when they had seen it, they made known abroad the word" (or "saying") "which was told them concerning this Child." They were under no command to keep it secret ; and, their hearts overflowing with holy joy, they divulged it everywhere, as the expression used here signifies ; and thus they became, next to the angel, the first preachers of the Gospel, the first ambassadors of the Saviour of the world. What effect did their message

produce? "All that heard it *wondered*:" but it is not said that all *believed*. Doubtless there were then, as there ever have been, sceptics who were disposed to laugh; yet in the fact that all wondered, it is implied that none were altogether unmoved; and it is highly probable that in the course of a few hours a considerable number of persons would be gathered around the stable, listening to the recital of the shepherds, and wishing to get a sight of the wondrous Child.

But more is said of the shepherds. "They returned" to their flocks and their occupation, "glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them." "A beautiful example," says Oosterzee, "of their pious fidelity to their vocation." Their extraordinary experience does not withdraw them from their daily and ordinary duties, but enables them to perform them with increased gladness of heart. We hear no more of them; for they, probably, "fell asleep" before the beginning of our Lord's public ministry, with grateful recollections of this night, and in a frame of mind like that of the aged Simeon. Their names, unknown on earth, are written in heaven; and their experience is the best example of the first beatitude. (Matt. v. 3.) Undoubtedly, their early and simple testimony to the new-born Saviour was not entirely without

fruit; though they might soon have been convinced that such a message, brought to them from heaven, was not calculated for the ears of every one, nor intended to be proclaimed on the house-tops.

But what of Mary? Of her it is said, that "she kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart." How much is implied in these few words, and what precious lessons do they suggest to us! The piety of Mary was unostentatious and childlike; and she kept all these things in her memory, and revolved them in her heart. Very precious to her were the "words" spoken by the shepherds, and highly confirmatory of her faith in God; and again, and yet again, she thought of them, until they were engraven on her mind, and inwrought in the very depths of her soul. And to whom but Mary was St. Luke indebted for these facts? At a much later period of her life, probably after the ascension of the Saviour, they were as familiar to her as the events of Pentecost; and she may either have written them herself, or told them to the evangelist by word of mouth. And shall we doubt her testimony, or his? Shall we deny the miraculous conception, the story about the shepherds, and the rest of the phænomena related by St. Luke? These chapters are spurious, we are told. Are they? Then whence did they come? Who was their author? And

when and how were they annexed to what is genuine in this Gospel? Until the rationalists of the age can answer these and similar questions, we shall continue, as will the whole Church of God, to hold fast this precious document, and to ponder it in our hearts, after the example of the Virgin-Mother. And if there are any facts in history worthy of the deep, sustained attention of the human mind, they are those that relate to the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God. We may never know, or we may forget, the events connected with the birth of Alexander, Cæsar, or Napoleon, and neither in mind nor in heart shall we suffer much loss; but a firm faith in *these events* is essential to our highest weal, for they stand connected with the entire plan of salvation by Jesus Christ. In other words, if we give up the early chapters of St. Matthew and St. Luke, we must give up the rest. We cannot consistently believe in Christ at all, if we do not believe what is here related of His birth. Nothing short of infidelity—the infidelity that flings the Bible to the winds—is consistent with the denial that Jesus is the Son of God, and that He was conceived in the womb of the Virgin by the Holy Ghost.

But, further, when it is said that “Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart,” the meaning probably is, that she

did not at that time divulge the fact of the miraculous conception of the Child. She maintained a holy reserve on this subject, and did not make it known either to the shepherds, or to any other persons; so that though the Child was recognised as the promised Messiah, He was known only as the son of Joseph and Mary, they only being acquainted with the sublime mystery of His birth, which they kept locked up for a considerable period in the closet of their own hearts. "It did, in truth, please the Almighty, through the discretion of the Blessed Mother and her guardian spouse, to shroud the mystery of the miraculous birth from the knowledge of every soul around; to keep close the secret (known only at the first to its highly-favoured subject, to the venerable pair to whom it was confided in the hill-country of Judæa, and lastly to Joseph, as we learn from the opening chapters of the first and third Gospels) till the time arrived when it could be generally appreciated and understood: thus to preclude all irreverent curiosity, and its yet more revolting accompaniment, calumnious falsehood; a falsehood which, when that mystery became generally notorious as Christian doctrine, and not before, burst forth with the utmost virulence from the enemies of the Son of Mary,"*

* Dr. Mill's "Observations," &c., p. 213. The enemies

If it be asked, when the secret was first divulged, the answer is, probably not until after our Lord's ascension into heaven. For there is no direct allusion to it in the accounts of the Saviour's public ministry even by Himself, nor does it appear to have been revealed in any way to the twelve during His sojourn with them on earth. Peter acknowledged, on one occasion, that Jesus was the Son of God; but even this confession does not imply that he was acquainted with the fact of the miraculous conception. It was a profound mystery, with which even the apostles could not be entrusted until Jesus had ascended to the right hand of God: then, however, it was made known by the holy Virgin, in the first instance, no doubt, to her friend and guardian St. John, in whose Gospel it is implied, if not expressed. By the time the Gospels were written it had become generally known; but St. Luke, though not an apostle, was chosen by the Holy Spirit to write these things, having perfect understanding of what had occurred from the very first. (Luke i. 3.) To St. Matthew also was the mystery revealed; and he was chosen, in like manner, to write the first Gospel, which, together with that of St. Luke, was universally received by the early referred to above are those Jews who in the second century circulated the most malignant reports concerning the birth of Jesus.

church as an authentic record of the life of Christ.

“Glory to God! We were in bitter need,
We sate in darkness, long and weary days;
But now our Light is come, the Light indeed,
And we may rise and shine with kindred rays;
The God-Man condescends for man’s ascending,
The Guiltless drinks guilt’s woes to work their ending.

“O mystic gift of God Omnipotent!
O happiness for man, most deep! most dear!
This is no theme for subtle argument,
No lore of earth hath lot or portion here:
That the Great God should so abaséd be—
We speak, we cannot search, the mystery.”

LYRA MESSIANICA.

It is, indeed, “no theme for subtle argument.”
It is a theme beyond all argument, because
surpassing all human conception. Yet faith
realises its truth; and not its truth only, but
also its grandeur and its power.



CHAPTER VI.



THE PRESENTATION OF THE HOLY CHILD IN THE TEMPLE.

WHEN God ratified His covenant with Abraham, He gave him, as a sign of that covenant, the rite of circumcision; and every male child born in his house or bought with money of a stranger, was to be circumcised on the eighth day after his birth. (Gen. xvii. 10—14.) This rite was ever afterwards observed by all his descendants, and was expressly re-enacted by the law of Moses; (Lev. xii. 3;) so that it was a necessary condition of Jewish nationality.

The Holy Child was circumcised, and was thus “made under the law;” (Gal. iv. 4;) becoming subject to all its obligations, or, as St. Paul expresses it, “a debtor” to the whole of it, as every one was who received circumcision. (Gal. v. 3.) As He was perfectly free from sin, our feeble reason might, at the first view, suggest that He might have been exempt from it; but

He came "to fulfil all righteousness," and thus to meet, on our behalf, all that the law demanded at our hands. Dr. Lange says, that it had "no other import for the sacred body, without spot or blemish, than that thus it became free from blame in the eyes of the Jewish Church:" but his translator rightly corrects him, by observing that "it had a meaning in the eye of God, as well as in the eye of the Church. It was the sign of subjection to the whole law in all its aspects."*

And now it was that he was called JESUS, as the angel had directed before He was conceived in the womb.† On the import of that name we have already dwelt. It was the name which is "above every name," and was given to the Holy Child *now*, to be borne by Him *for ever*; for Jesus—the Saviour—is the name of our exalted Head, and will continue to be His name through the vast cycles of eternity. (Phil. ii. 9.)

Another period elapsed of two-and-thirty days, making forty in the whole, when the parents of the Child "brought Him to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord." Two duties had to be performed according to the law: the first, that of offering the first-born son to God, as His by a special claim; and the second, that of the mother celebrating her purification from legal defilement by presenting a lamb, a pair of

* "Life of Jesus," vol. i., p. 399. † Luke ii. 21.

turtle-doves, or two young pigeons. When God destroyed the first-born of the Egyptians and spared the first-born of His people Israel, He claimed the first-born for Himself;* so that strictly the duties of the priesthood devolved upon the first-born, and every first-born son was under obligation to do service in the temple. The tribe of Levi was, however, chosen for this work in the stead of the first-born; and the first-born of all the other tribes were redeemed from this service by the presentation of five shekels in money to the treasury of the Lord.† This redemption-money was due on the thirtieth day after the child's birth; but it was not always paid on that day; and in the case before us not until the fortieth day.‡ Jesus was Mary's first-born son, and to present Him to the Lord would, we may be sure, be her delight and joy; but she waited until the days of her purification were accomplished, when she could go up to Jerusalem, and at the same time offer for herself the sacrifice that the law required.

Some chronologists suppose that the visit of the Magi and the flight into Egypt occurred during the forty days, and, therefore, prior to the presentation of Jesus in the temple. But, as Wieseler observes,§ it is scarcely possible for

* Exod. xiii. 2

† Num. xviii. 15, 16.

‡ Luke ii. 23: see Lightfoot in loco, "Works," vol. xii., p. 87.

§ "Synopsis," p. 139.

all that Matthew records to have taken place within this period; besides which, according to the law, the mother had to remain at home during the whole of the forty days. Accordingly, it is now generally admitted, that this was the order of the events:—(1) the presentation in the temple; (2) a return to Bethlehem, implied though not stated; and (3) the visit of the wise men, together with the slaughter of the innocents, and the flight of Joseph into Egypt with his precious charge.

Let us now, therefore, follow the parents of the Child to the Holy City, and there observe the circumstances that occurred. The distance from Bethlehem to Jerusalem was between three and four miles, and the journey would probably be performed by Joseph and Mary on foot. They were poor; and as they entered the city and approached the temple, no special notice would be taken of them or of the Babe: for though the tidings of the shepherds might have reached some few in Jerusalem, they were probably not believed; and, if they were, it was not made known by a herald going before, that now the wondrous Child was about to appear in the capital, there to be presented to the Lord. Yet an event was now about to take place, big with momentous issues to the world; and hence, however carelessly it was viewed by men, by angels it was regarded with an interest similar

to that which they had taken in His birth. When Hannah, the mother of Samuel, came with her child to the priest, she said with a joyful heart, "For this child I prayed; and the Lord hath given me my petition: therefore also I have lent him to the Lord; as long as he liveth he shall be lent to the Lord." (1 Sam. i. 27, 28.) And would not Mary think of Hannah? She came to redeem her Child from the temple-service, and for this purpose she and her husband dropped the five shekels into the treasury of the temple; but she knew well that in a service still more noble and hallowed that Child would be employed for God, and she, too, rejoiced in the Lord, even as when she uttered her Magnificat of praise.

Five shekels, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, amounted in value to somewhat less than thirteen shillings of our money,—a sum which, poor as Joseph and Mary were, they had at their command, and willingly cast into the treasury, trusting in God for the supply of their future need. But a lamb for the sacrifice, which Mary was required to offer, they had not; for she offered "a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons," which, according to the law, might be substituted for the lamb in case of poverty. "And if she be not able to bring a lamb, then she shall bring two turtles, or two young pigeons; the one for the burnt offering,

and the other for a sin offering : and the priest shall make an atonement for her, and she shall be clean.* May it not be inferred from the fact that such was Mary's offering, that the wise men of the East had not yet presented their treasures to the Child, of gold, and frankincense, and myrrh ? Had such treasures come into the possession of Joseph and Mary, would they not have procured a lamb for the sacrifice ? Turtle-doves or pigeons were called the " offering of the poor," which if a rich man presented, " he did not do his duty."† Had they, then, been able to bring a lamb, the parents of the Holy Child would undoubtedly have brought it.

Pigeons are domesticated birds, but turtle-doves are migratory, returning to countries in the Mediterranean in the spring ; whence Solomon says, in the Canticles, " Lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone ; the flowers appear on the earth ; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land."‡ Now, it was in the spring of the year that the Holy Family went to Jerusalem on this interesting errand ; and what more probable than that the birds they carried with them had but recently arrived from some warmer region, and had been caught by Joseph near to the spot where the Child was born ? And how appropriate

* Lev. xii. 8 ; comp. Luke ii. 24. † Lightfoot, *in loco*.

‡ Song of Sol. ii. 11, 12 ; compare Jer. viii. 7.

an offering were these doves! The dove is a symbol of purity, being noted for its fidelity to its mate, and also for its affection for its young;* and here were Joseph and Mary, who had been faithful to each other in the time of trial, bringing this sacred Child to the temple, there to present Him to the Lord. How singularly fitting to their case was the offering of the pair of turtle-doves at the same time!

One of these turtle-doves was offered as a burnt offering, the other as a sin offering. Mary, then, in all probability, would present one of the birds to the priest who was officiating in the temple; who, taking it from her hands, would wring off its head, pluck away the crop and feathers, and then burn it on the altar as a burnt sacrifice and offering made by fire, of a sweet savour unto the Lord.† She would then present the other dove for a sin offering; and the priest would take it in like manner, but would “merely sever the head at the back of the neck,” and sprinkle the blood upon the wall of the altar round about.‡ Was not this an acknowledgment, on the part of Mary, of her need of an atonement? Had she been immaculate, as the Church of Rome affirms she was, where would have been the necessity of a sin offering of any kind? But she brought one, not only

* Pliny, “*Nat. History*,” x., 52. † Lev. i. 15—17.

‡ See Kurtz on *Sacrificial Worship*, p. 244, Clark.

to meet the requirements of the law of Moses, but also that, through it, she might look to another sin offering, even that of the spotless Lamb of God, which she saw, perhaps, though faintly as yet, in the person of her mysterious Son. O, the depth of her humility as she presented those turtle-doves to the priest! Yet O, the joy and hope that would animate her breast, as she still kept all these things and pondered them in her heart!

And now a scene was witnessed in the temple of the most solemn and impressive character. An aged man named Simeon, guided by the Holy Spirit, entered it at this moment, and perceived immediately that the Child of Mary was no ordinary child, but none other than the Lord's Christ. Attempts have been made to identify this aged man with Rabbi Simeon, the son of Hillel and the father of Gamaliel;* and there is little doubt that the Rabbi Simeon was living at this period:† but the opinion is a very doubtful one; for St. Luke gives no intimation that the Simeon he mentions was a distinguished character, but merely speaks of him as "a man in Jerusalem." But, though not famous among his fellow-men, this aged saint stood high in the favour of God: for he was "just and devout;" that is, upright and pious,—one whose walk was like that of Enoch or that of Noah,

* Acts v. 34.

† Lightfoot on St. Luke, in loco.

and upon whom the Holy Ghost rested in a more than ordinary degree. And "he was waiting for the consolation of Israel." "The whole nation," says Lightfoot, "waited for the 'consolation of Israel;' insomuch that there was nothing more common with them than to swear by the desire which they had of seeing it." But Simeon was one of those who waited for it, believing that it was nigh at hand; for to him it had been revealed by the Holy Ghost, that he should not see death until he had seen this consolation,—even the long-expected Messiah. Either in a dream, or, what is far more probable, by a deep impression made upon his mind by the Spirit of God, he had been assured that ere he departed to his rest he should look upon that Saviour who was to bring comfort to Israel in their distress, and to scatter the darkness that brooded over the land.

A modern tradition describes Simeon as blind, and as receiving his sight on the approach of the Child Jesus; but there is no need to add to the narrative of the Evangelist. By an impulse of the Spirit, Simeon entered the temple while the parents of the Holy Child were offering their sacrifice; and, under the guidance of the same Spirit, "he accosted and greeted them," as Lange observes, "as though he had long known and waited for them." They received his salutation; and he took the Child in his arms, and blessed God, and said,—

“Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace,
according to Thy word ;
For mine eyes have seen Thy Salvation,
Which Thou hast prepared before the face of all
people ;
A light to lighten the Gentiles,
And the glory of Thy people Israel.”

How genuine is this swan-like song ! “Compared with the hymns of Zacharias and Mary,” says Oosterzee, “it is more peculiarly characterized by its psychological truth, than even by its æsthetic beauty ;”* but it possesses both, and, like the two former songs, is a proof of the credibility of the early chapters of St. Luke.

Simeon was now prepared to die ; for he could die in peace. He had seen on earth all that he desired to see ; and now, therefore, he longed to be admitted to a sight of God in glory. “Who can fear the darkness of death, that hath the light of this world and the next too ? who can fear death this night, that hath had the Lord of life in his hand to-day ?”† Simeon feared not death. To him, as to St. Paul at a later period, it was but a departure ; not even a temporary cessation of his being, but merely a bidding farewell to earth to receive a welcome in heaven. He was at peace with God and with men ; and, moreover, his mind was now at

* Lange, “Com. on Luke,” vol. i., p. 82, Clark.

† Dr. Donne’s Sermons, vol. i., p. 77.

peace in relation to the future welfare of Israel; for God's Salvation had appeared, and there were rich blessings in store both for the Jewish people and the Gentile world.

Simeon was well-versed in the prophecies of the Old Testament, and especially in those of Isaiah, of whose spirit he seems to have drunk. He held none of those crude and narrow views, so prevalent among his people at this period, which excluded the Gentiles from any participation in the blessings of the Messiah's reign, unless, indeed, they were incorporated with Israel by submitting to circumcision and engaging to observe the law. On the contrary, he entertained those noble thoughts which had long before been expressed in the glowing language of the son of Amoz. Did Isaiah speak of Christ as standing for "an Ensign of the nations?"* Simeon spoke of Him as "God's Salvation" "prepared" in the presence, or "before the face, of all people." Did Isaiah say that God would give Him "for a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles,"† and that "the Gentiles should come to His light, and kings to the brightness of His rising?"‡ Simeon called Him "a light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of His people Israel." And thus the aged saint stood, at this moment, on the loftiest heights of prophecy, and, looking into the distant future, beheld the nations

* Isaiah xi. 10.

† Isaiah xlii. 6.

‡ Isaiah lx. 3.

gathering around the standard of Immanuel; and his own people, the Jews, though for awhile behind a cloud, ultimately led back into His brightest beams, and beautified with the transcendent glory of His nature.

"Joseph and His mother marvelled at those things which were spoken of Him." But why did they marvel? Did they not know all this? Did they not know that He was the Christ, the Son of God? They did, and yet they marvelled. "Not so much, indeed," as Olshausen observes, "at those things which were spoken of their Son, as that the Spirit testified so uniformly, through the most diverse characters, of the spiritual importance of the Child." The song of Simeon presented the great salvation now to be accomplished in a new aspect before their minds; and they were filled with transports of delight, mingled with wonder and surprise.

"And Simeon blessed them,"—invoked on Joseph and Mary the special and abundant blessing of God in the care of their sacred charge. But now a note was uttered by this aged saint of a somewhat melancholy kind. "Behold," said he, addressing the Virgin-Mother, whilst he still held the Child in his arms, "Behold, this Child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against; (yea, a sword shall pierce through thine own soul also,) that the

thoughts of many hearts may be revealed." Again does Simeon echo, as it were, the words of Isaiah, who said of the Messiah, that He should be "for a stone of stumbling and for a rock of offence to both the houses of Israel;" (Isaiah viii. 14;) and again does he look into the distant future, and discern the opposition which unbelief would raise to the establishment of the Messiah's reign. In the hearts of the Jewish people, at this time, there was a deeply-seated corruption; for, notwithstanding their apparent zeal for the law of Moses, and their Pharisaic regard to all its outward ceremonies and rites, they were, for the most part, strangers to the piety of their ancestors, and full of enmity towards God. Simeon perceived that the coming of the Messiah would be the means of revealing the latent evils of men's hearts; for it would be like the light, the beams of which, penetrating into the darkest chamber, serve to disclose and make visible whatever has been therein hid. But why did he add the parenthetic note, "Yea, a sword shall pierce through thine own soul also?" Might he not have spared Mary this sudden pang, and permitted her to enjoy the gladness of that hour without alloy? Not without sorrow would he utter these words, we may be sure; but he spoke under the influence of the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit doubtless intended to prepare the gentle mind of Mary for those throes of grief

which she would afterwards endure. She would keep these words too, and ponder them in her heart; and they would tend to check the elation of her soul, by reminding her that only through the suffering of her Son, could she attain that abiding peace of which He was to be the Source and Giver.

And now Simeon retires from the scene upon which he is thus, for a moment, introduced, and, returning to his home, wherever that was, departs in peace ere the redeeming work of Christ is actually wrought out; for, believing in that work, as did the prophets before him, he, in virtue of it, was received, like them, to the abodes of endless rest.

But, probably whilst Simeon still lingered in the temple, Anna the prophetess joined the group. Anna was the daughter of one Phanuel, of the tribe of Aser, or Asher, and we are told that she was a widow eighty-four years of age. But her husband's name is not mentioned; for, indeed, her married life was short, extending only over seven years; and during her long widowhood she had lived within the precincts of the temple, serving God there, with fastings and prayers, night and day. How beautiful a character! She has been called "the happiest widow of Holy Scripture;" and she proves to us that, even under that dispensation, widowhood was not necessarily sad and gloomy, but often

cheered with the radiance of a heavenly hope, as the lonely one waited for the day of her espousals with the King of kings. And if a Jewish widow was thus happy, much more may a Christian widow be. Around her head the religion of the Cross flings some of its brightest beams, telling her that her Husband is the Lord of Hosts, and bidding her look forward to the day when He will come to receive her into the mansions of eternal light.

That Anna should come in "that instant," is not at all surprising. For her there was a special attraction there. She was a prophetess, one possessed of the Spirit of God; and that Spirit no doubt led her at this moment to the spot where Jesus was. And, coming in, she too gave thanks to the Lord, and "spake of Him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem." The word here used implies that she appeared suddenly, and perhaps took the parents by surprise. But she perceived at once that the Child was the Redeemer for whom many were looking in Jerusalem; and to all such she spake of Him, not only now, but afterwards as opportunity was given. "There were then a certain number of pious persons dwelling in the capital, who lived in and upon the hope of salvation through the Messiah, and among whom the report of His birth was soon spread. Who knows how soon this report might not have spread also

throughout the whole country through their means, had not the secret departure of the Holy Family to Egypt and to Nazareth caused every trace of them to disappear from the eyes of this little band in Jerusalem? Perhaps, too, it was chiefly composed of the aged, the poor, and the lowly, whose influence would not be very extensive. The new-born Saviour, now recognised, through the testimony of Simeon and Anna, by the really noblest in Israel, was soon to receive the homage of the Gentile world also, through the arrival of the wise men from the East.”*

How much more the Evangelist might have told us of Anna, had the Holy Spirit been pleased so to direct him! But of her subsequent history not a word is said. She just appears for a moment on the sacred page, and then passes away without even a line respecting her death. Like Simeon's, however, her departure was doubtless calm and tranquil, and the spirit of this aged matron now dwells in the more glorious temple not made with hands. “Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.” Such were Simeon and Anna; and hence they were privileged to discern the Deity in the infant Saviour. They were taught of the Spirit that the Godhead was latent in that lowly Babe. They saw in Mary's Child what the proud and

* Oosterzee in Lange's “Com. on Luke,” vol. i., p. 84.

lofty-minded cannot see even yet; for the mystery of the Incarnation is revealed only to those whose spirits have been chastened by penitence and prayer.

“ Still to the lowly soul
He doth Himself impart,
And for His cradle and His throne
Chooseth the pure in heart.”

St. Luke, to whom we are indebted for the beautiful scenes on which we have thus dwelt, closes this part of his narrative with the following remark :—“ And when they had performed all things according to the law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own city Nazareth.” (Verse 39.) He thus omits the visit of the wise men to Bethlehem, the flight into Egypt, and the massacre of the innocents, as not comprehended in his plan. That he was unacquainted with them, by no means follows : that there is any real discrepancy here between his narrative and St. Matthew’s, none but the most captious will affirm. He does not *include* these events in his account, but he certainly does not *exclude* them; but simply passes them by, and hastens on to the settlement of the Holy Family in Nazareth. In this, as in other portions of St. Luke’s Gospel, we may discern the difference between his object and that of St. Matthew. “ In St. Matthew’s the birth of Christ is connected

with national glories; in St. Luke's with pious hopes. Instead of recalling the crisis of Jewish history, and the majesty of the typical kingdom, the Pauline Evangelist begins his narrative with a full recital of the personal acts of God's mercy to the just and prayerful, and His all-powerful grace to the holy and believing." "In the one, we read the fulfilment of the Jewish idea of a royal Messiah; in the other, the realization of the craving, clear or indistinct, of the human heart. In the one, we see typified the universal reign of Christ; and in the other, His universal mercy."* There is, indeed, diversity in all the four Gospels, just as there is diversity in the four parts of music: but there is also harmony the most beautiful and perfect; which many, however, fail to discern, through a predisposition to hyper-criticism, or a predetermination to cavil and find fault.

* Westcott's "Introduction," p. 291: comp. Lange's "Life of Christ," vol. vi., Clark.



CHAPTER VII.



THE HOLY CHILD AND THE MAGI OF THE EAST.

IN the persons of the Shepherds, of Simeon, and of Anna, the Holy Child had now received the homage of the Jewish people; but beyond the pale of the temple there was a vast Gentile world which He also came to save, and it was necessary that representatives of that portion of the human family should present to Him a tribute of praise and honour, as an earnest of the glory hereafter to be given to Him by all the nations of the earth.

Amid the splendours of the East, probably on the shores of the Persian Gulf, God had been, for some time, preparing a few distinguished minds for this great work. Persia, though not the original seat of the Zend religion, had long been its principal home; and there the Zendavesta, said to have been written by Zoroaster, upwards of five hundred years B.C., was

still regarded with reverential awe. It told of Ormuzd, the principle or element of light; and of Ahriman, the element of darkness: attributing to the former the creation of the sun, moon, and planets, and to the latter the introduction into the world of everything vile, noxious, and evil. Of this religion the Magi (μάγοι), or wise men, were the priests, or priestly diviners; of whom Philo says that they "investigated the works of nature for the purpose of becoming acquainted with the truth," and "initiated themselves and others in the Divine virtues by very clear explanations." Of this class were "the wise men who came from the East to Jerusalem," inquiring for Him who was "born King of the Jews." (Matt. ii. 1, 2.) It is true that the expression "from the East" is not a very definite one; and hence some have supposed it to mean Arabia, and have found, in the coming of these wise men, a fulfilment of the prophecy of Psalm lxxii. 15, "To Him shall be given of the gold of Sheba;" whilst others have fixed on Mesopotamia as the country indicated, the seat of the Chaldean astrology, and the home of the prophet Balaam. But that these wise men were Persians is highly probable from the fact that the system of the Zend contained "remarkable germs of truth; as, for example, the idea of a Zoziosh,—an expected Redeemer;" and because "we may more easily imagine a greater correspondence between Jewish

ideas, and the natural religion of the Persians, than with that of any other nation.”*

Throughout the East, a general expectation was at this time entertained of One who should come from Judæa and gain the dominion of the world:† nor could these Magi be ignorant of Jerusalem; for the fame of its temple had spread over the known world. The immediate cause, however, of their taking this journey was the observance of a star which they saw in the East, and which they understood as a sign of the birth of an illustrious King. They were astrologers; and “it is well known that, according to the astrological belief of the old world, any extraordinary events, especially the birth and death of men of high rank or distinction, were portended by stars, especially comets, and by constellations.”‡ What, then, was the nature of this star? From calculations made by the celebrated astronomer Kepler in the year 1606, and since verified by Ideler and others, it was found that in the month of May, B.C. 7, a remarkable conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn took place in the constellation Aries; and that on the 20th of that month these planets rose three and a half hours before the sun, and shone with such splendour

* Olshausen's Com. on Matthew ii.

† Suetonius, *Vespasian*, iv.: comp. Tacitus's "*Hist.*," v. 13.

‡ Winer; quoted by Wieseler p. 55.

as would be sure to attract the special attention of astronomers. Now, as we have already seen,* our Lord was born in the year B.C. 4, A.U.C. 750; so that this conjunction of the two planets occurred about two years before His birth. What, then, is more probable, is the argument of some very recent commentators, than that these Magi took this striking phenomenon as the sign, for which they had long been looking, of the birth, in Jerusalem, of the King of the Jews? And as this interpretation of the star shelters them from the necessity of supposing that it was at all miraculous, they at once adopt the hypothesis, and are glad at the discovery of so singular a coincidence.† Yet, beautiful as the theory is, and supported as it has been by several great names, it must, we think, be rejected; as it by no means meets the necessities of the case. For surely the wise men would have set out on their journey soon after the first appearance of the star; in which case, unless they came from a much greater distance than is generally supposed, they would have arrived in Jerusalem twelve or eighteen months before the Holy Child was born. Besides, it appears that, for a time, they lost sight of the star, that they saw it again when they left

* Chapter IV.

† See Alford's "Greek Testament," in loco; and Wieseler's "Synopsis," p. 63.

Jerusalem for Bethlehem, and that it "went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was." (Matt. ii. 9.) But how could an ordinary star, or a conjunction of planets, do this? "How a star, be it a comet or a constellation, can remain stationary in the celestial vault, and seem to stand over a house, cannot be conceived. A meteor of a fiery or luminous nature would explain this more easily, if this assumption implied the possibility that the *ἀστήρ* here spoken of was a thing of this kind."* And why may it not have been? Why should we hesitate to admit a supernatural interference of Divine Providence on behalf of these Magi, when we are under the necessity of admitting one on behalf of the shepherds of the plain? Such was the view entertained by the best divines a century ago,† and it is still held by many whose names are worthy of renown. "A new star," says Bishop Ellicott, "which the tenor of the whole narrative wholly precludes our deeming aught else than a veritable body moving apparently in the limits of our own atmosphere, and subject not to astronomical, but to special and fore-ordained laws, had suddenly beamed, not many months before, upon the eyes of these

* Olshausen's "Com.," in loco; and comp. Smith's "Dictionary of the Bible," art., "Star of the Wise Men," vol. iii., p. 1374.

† Dr. Thos. Jackson's Works, vol. vi., p. 259.

watchers in their own Eastern lands; and, either by co-operating with dormant prophecy or deep-seated expectation, leads them to that land, with which, either their own science, or, more probably, the whole feeling of the Eastern world, tended to associate the mystery of the future.”*

The account of the visit of these Magi given by St. Matthew is too plain and simple to be mythical; but much that is mythical was, by degrees, added to the account. Tradition stepped in, and affirmed that these wise men were kings; then that they were three in number; next, that their names were Melchior, Gaspar, and Balthazar; and next, that they arrived in Jerusalem with a retinue of a thousand men, having left behind them, on the banks of the Euphrates, an army of seven thousand. All such additions to the sacred narrative we dismiss as worthless; yet may we not be permitted to imagine what took place, and to picture to ourselves the striking scene? We suppose, then, that about the time of the Saviour's birth, a remarkable star, or luminous body, is observed by a few priests of the Magian religion who are anxiously inquiring after truth. Such a star they had never before seen; and, as they watch it, they observe that it moves, and moves in the direction leading towards the land of which they

* “Historical Lectures,” p. 74: comp. Mill on “Pantheistic Principles,” p. 305, 2d edit.

know Jerusalem is the metropolis. They have long been expecting that there a King would be born; and, taught by an inward voice, which, although they know it not, is the voice of the Spirit of God, they look upon this star as a sign that this King is really born. To Jerusalem, then, they must at once repair; and, taking with them votive offerings of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, they bid adieu for a time to home and friends, and, led by the star, which goes before them, they reach in a few weeks the far-famed city. They enter it, but a day or two after the Holy Family has returned to Bethlehem; and their first inquiry is, "Where is He that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen His star in the East, and are come to worship Him."

It is probable that at that time many companies of foreigners visited Jerusalem; and hence the arrival of this party would not have occasioned much notice but for this remarkable question, and the reason they assigned for their appearance in the city. But the intelligence reached the ears of Herod; and "when he heard it, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him." Herod was a tyrant, and moreover a usurper; and, hearing of one "*born* King of the Jews," he doubtless trembled for his crown; and his alarm awakened that of all the inhabitants of the city. With the utmost haste he summoned together

the Sanhedrim, or at least the chief-priests and scribes, and appearing, perhaps, in their midst himself, he asked them where, according to their Scriptures, the Messiah should be born. *He*, then, knew that the Messiah was expected; and he inferred that *He* was none other than "the King" respecting whom these strangers had inquired. The reply was, "In Bethlehem of Judæa;" for, as the Evangelist adds, so it had been predicted by the prophet Micah, whose words he quotes from the Septuagint, though not literally. Or, perhaps, as Alford thinks, the passage was cited by the Sanhedrim to Herod, who would thus be all the better satisfied. And now the wily politician seeks a private interview with the Magi, and, supposing that the appearance of the star coincided with the birth of the Child, inquired of them diligently, or ascertained with the greatest accuracy, at what time they first beheld it. He then sent them to Bethlehem, with an injunction to return, when they had found the Child, and bring him word, that he also might go and worship Him. Fox-like—full of cunning and duplicity—were all the Herods; but such in the highest degree was the character of this Herod, though he was called "the Great." Did he intend to go and worship the Child? Why then did he not go at once? Why wait for the return of the Magi? Why not accompany them to the city of David, and present his

homage to the Child without delay? We shall see hereafter why, and how, as Lange remarks, the old spirit of Esau, who said, "Now will I slay my brother Jacob," was still rife in the breast of the haughty Idumæan.

It may be asked, "Why did the star guide these Magi to Jerusalem, and not to Bethlehem?" But was it not most natural that they should go to Jerusalem first? Where would they expect the King of the Jews to be born but in the capital of His own dominions? And so short was the distance between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, that the star would, in the first instance, appear over both.

Their audience with the king detained them through the greater portion of the day, and night closed in upon their wanderings in a strange land; but then the star was seen again in the heights of heaven, and "when they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy." That a star—a new star—should be the means of conducting these Magi to Jesus, was most fitting; for He was "the Star that should come out of Jacob," spoken of by the prophet Balaam, (Num. xxiv. 17,) and "the Bright and Morning Star" (Rev. xxii. 16) of the dispensation that was now about to open on the world. And these Magi were astronomers, who had been accustomed to observe with care the sidereal heavens in the serene and beautiful nights of Persia; and the science, not yet so corrupted as

it afterwards became in the days of Simon Magus, had led them to the contemplation of the mysteries of religion, respecting which they were craving for clearer light. Light, more light, on those profound secrets which relate to the Divine,—to the Great First Cause,—was the object of their intense desire; and just as the magnetic needle turns to the pole, so did their minds turn to the extraordinary star, and see in it a sign which only minds like theirs could see. How was it that Herod, when he heard of this star, did not look for it, and see in it what the Magi saw? Alas! he was a miserable worldling, and, whatever he may have thought of the wise men's testimony concerning the star, he cared for nothing but his own selfish ends; and, jealous of the new-born King, who, he supposed, would prove a rival, already meditated His destruction whilst yet He was an infant of days. What a contrast between the proud Idumæan on the throne and the lowly pilgrims from the East!

With exulting joy the Magi reached Bethlehem (as we have supposed) in the evening of the day, and, in all probability, about the forty-second day after the birth of the Child. The star went before them, "till it came and stood over where the young Child was." Was there nothing supernatural in this? Surely there was. God was near, and was thus guiding these in-

quiring minds to Him who was the Light they sought. They entered the house, τὴν οἰκίαν,—not the stable, of which St. Matthew makes no mention; for Bethlehem was no longer full of strangers, so that there was room for Mary and her new-born Child in some more comfortable abode. And what did they see? They saw the young Child, with Mary His mother, and at once they recognised the new-born King of the Jews. Doubtless there was something in the aspect both of the Child and of the mother of a superior nature; for if “heaven lies about *us* in *our* infancy,” it surely lay about that heavenly Child, and the child-like faith of the Magi was such that they needed no further evidence of the fact that they were now in the presence of Israel’s King. Whether they knew Him as the God-Man, the Word made flesh, is doubtful; but they fell down and worshipped Him,* after the Oriental manner of doing homage to the great; and, opening their treasures, the chests or bags in which they carried their gifts, they presented to Him “gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.”

* The word προσκυνεῖν does not necessarily mean religious worship in the highest sense; yet it is certainly so used in many passages in the New Testament; (*e. g.*, John iv. 20, &c.; Rev. xix. 10;) and it is at least highly probable that, on the ground of the revelation they had received from heaven, the Magi intended “to pay Divine honours to the true Star of hope and happiness to the world.” (See Dr. Pye Smith’s “Scripture Testimony,” book iii., chap. iii.)

Were these gifts symbolical? So Theophylact and many of the fathers thought,—the gold being offered to Him as a King, the myrrh as a Prophet, and the frankincense as a Priest: nor is this so fanciful as some have represented it. Such, at least, were the offices which this newborn Child would hold; and in these gifts there was certainly, whether intended on the part of the wise men or not, a very remarkable fitness and suitability to His threefold character. Gold is the most precious of the metals, and was frequently reserved in the East for the use of kings and princes. But who so worthy of a gift like this as He who is the Proprietor of earth and heaven, who claims the gold and the silver as His own, and the cattle upon a thousand hills? Prophecy had said, “To Him shall be given of the gold of Sheba,” and now it came; (though not immediately from Sheba;) but only as the pledge of larger gifts to be poured at His feet from age to age. For O, what treasures of gold have since been presented to the Son of God, and are being presented in the times in which we live! Yet not too much; nay, not enough; for He is worthy of the riches both of the West and of the East, and His church still needs pecuniary means to carry the tidings of the Gospel to the world.

Frankincense is a costly gum, or resin, which exudes from the bark of a tree called the *arbor*

thuris, which formerly grew in Arabia and in the islands of the Indian Archipelago. The purest kind of frankincense is white and glittering; whence its Hebrew name, *libanus*.* Its taste is bitter, but its odour pleasant and agreeable. It was extensively used in the temple-service of the Jews; and was not only one of the ingredients of the holy anointing oil, (Exod. xxx. 34, 35,) but was burnt in the censer of the high priest as incense before the Lord. (Lev. ii. 1.) Myrrh is another gum, the produce of a thorn-tree called the *balsamodendron myrrha*, which also grows in Arabia and other parts of the East. The antiseptic qualities of myrrh caused it to be used in the art of embalming, for which purpose it was largely imported into Egypt. In a hundred pounds' weight of myrrh and aloes, Nicodemus wrapped the dead body of our Lord.

These Magi, then, were not poor, like the shepherds, but rich and opulent; and in the noblest and most generous manner they poured their treasures at the feet of the Holy Child; never asking, as some would have done, of what service they would be to Him, but thinking only of the debt they owed Him as the future Ruler of the nations of the earth. For was it as "the King of the Jews" that they thus honoured the Child? Did they not rather look

* From לבן to be white.

upon Him as "the Desire of all nations," and see in Him the Deliverer whom they also, as Gentiles, had so long expected? We cannot really know what their anticipations were; but they must have looked upon the Babe with an interest the most intense; and because of what they believed He would become, they presented to Him these costly gifts.

"They gave their best,—O tenfold shame
On us, their fallen progeny,
Who sacrifice the blind and lame,
Who will not wake or fast with Thee!"

KEBLE.

"Whatever we have of precious gifts," says Dr. Arnold, "whether of body or of mind, these all should be offered to the service of Christ, as the only sacrifice of gratitude which it is in our power to render." But how many refuse to present to Him any gifts whatever! and how many more offer to Him that which costs them nothing,—the mere shreds of their property, the mere fragments of their days or years! Let us catch the spirit of these Eastern sages. Let us be ready to give to Christ our *best* gifts, our *best* affections, our *best* services; and let us offer to Him the frankincense of our prayers, the myrrh of a chaste and holy life, and the gold of a pure heart, tried in the furnace seven times; for He is worthy of our best, and "from the

rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same His name shall be great among the Gentiles; and in every place incense shall be offered unto His name, and a pure offering." (Mal. i. 11.)

It is said of these Magi, that "they saw the young Child with Mary His mother," and that "they worshipped *Him*," not *her*. Doubtless the Church of Rome would have been glad if they had worshipped both: but no! that Church can find no countenance for its practice of praying to the Virgin in the conduct of the wise men of the East. Even their gifts were not presented to her, but to the Child, or to her *through Him*; and hence He was the sole Object of their adoration, and they honoured Mary *only* in an inferior degree. Joseph is not mentioned; for either he was absent at the time, or is purposely kept in the background of the scene.

Yet Mary received the gifts; and thus she was enriched in her poverty, and all her wants were met. In the temple she had presented her offerings to the Lord, and now they were returned to her with abundant interest; and provision was thus made for the journey into Egypt so soon to be taken,—where the frankincense and the myrrh could be sold for a considerable sum. The Magi knew not of this journey; nor, as yet, did Mary know; and perhaps she would be ready to ask, "Of what service

can these costly gums be to me or to the Child?" But God knew of the journey; and for it He provided amply beforehand, thus meeting the emergencies of Mary ere they actually arose.

This event has been called the Epiphany, or Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, and is celebrated by the Church on the 6th of January; on which day of the year, also, according to tradition, Jesus was baptized by John in Jordan, and wrought His first miracle at the marriage-feast in Cana of Galilee. It is not probable that any of these events took place on that day; and as to the first, the one now under consideration, it probably occurred towards the end of March. It was, however, an Epiphany, and a glorious one. The Redeemer was now revealed as the Light of the Gentile world; and a pledge was given of that more glorious manifestation of Himself to the nations which has already taken place, and which is still to be perfected in the latter days.

Not by the star, but by a dream, were these Magi further instructed; for God has various means of making known His will to men, and in dreams and visions of the night He was wont to speak to such as were prepared to hear. It is natural to suppose that the wise men spent the night at Bethlehem; and in the slumbers of that night they were "warned of God in a dream," or received an intimation of the Divine will,

(*χορηματισθέντες*,) that they should not return to Herod. God taketh the wise in their own craftiness. The wily politician was waiting at Jerusalem the return of the sages whom he had so carefully instructed, but they came not; and when he made inquiries respecting them, as he doubtless did, he learnt that they had treated him with contempt, had already left the country, and were on their journey home. They had no need to return to Jerusalem in order to get back to Persia; but might have gone, as probably they did go, by way of Hebron, directly south. And with what gladness would they pursue their way! They had seen the new-born King of the Jews, and had been permitted to present to Him their costly gifts; and that sight was recompense sufficient for all their toil, long and tedious as the journey was. And would they not make known to their friends and countrymen the facts with which they had become acquainted? And would not many participate in this satisfaction and joy? Thus were they highly honoured in being the first Gentile heralds of the Prince of Peace; and, though the results are nowhere recorded on the page of history, the great day may show that they prepared some hearts for the reception of Christianity, which, according to Eusebius, found its way into Persia at a very early period.

Of legends respecting the Magi there is a

sufficient store. They were found by St. Thomas in Parthia, offered themselves for baptism, and became evangelists of the Christian faith. After their death their relics were discovered in the East, and brought to Constantinople, where they were placed in the great church now called the Mosque of St. Sophia; thence they were conveyed to Milan; and when Milan fell into the hands of Frederick Barbarossa, (A.D. 1162,) they were transferred, through the influence of the archbishop of Cologne, to the cathedral of that city, where, it is said, they still remain. The story is just as credible as that of the Holy Coat of Treves, that of the Kerchief of St. Veronica, or that of Pilate's Staircase at Rome; but Popery is sustained by things of this kind, and the worship of relics is one of the dogmas by which it holds in vassalage the minds of its superstitious devotees. How humiliating to think that such absurdities as the winking of a picture of the Madonna, and the liquefaction of the blood of St. Januarius, can be believed by men whose piety and intelligence are undoubted! But there are many cases in which the noble intellect of man seems to be subverted to the dominion of the great mystery of iniquity. Christian charity would delight in the discovery of some method of releasing from the charge of gross idolatry the thousands who bow the knee to Mary, by supposing that they only worship Him in her, whom she had the distinguished honour to bear;

but the last phase of the error, consequent on Pio Nono's declaration of Mary's immaculate conception, is virtually to represent her standing as a goddess on the altar, "as if she alone were the Arbitress or the Dispenser of all graces and favour to man."* Will Protestant England ever succumb to Rome, and put Mary in the place of Christ? Whilst Popery is losing her hold on Italy and on France, will she find means of prolonging her influence and power on the shores of Britain? Such are the hopes of many of her votaries; and hence prayers for England's return to the so-called ancient faith are being offered up in many Papal churches. But England knows well, or ought to know, that the abandonment of her Protestantism would be her certain ruin; that if she should prove faithless to the trust reposed in her, her glory would soon wane, and her greatness be given to another nation.

* See Dr. Wordsworth's "Tour in Italy," vol. ii., p. 287.



CHAPTER VIII.



THE HOLY CHILD IN EGYPT, AND THE SLAUGHTER OF THE INNOCENTS.

MEN who deceive others never like to be deceived themselves. The wily Herod had secretly requested the wise men to return and communicate privately to him the result of their inquiries for the young Child at Bethlehem, telling them that it was also his intention to go and worship Him. But finding himself outwitted, he was filled with rage, and began to think of a plan by which to insure the Babe's destruction. We can imagine him waiting alone in his palace at Jerusalem for the return of the Magi, and, as hour after hour passed away, becoming more and more excited, when intelligence is brought to him that the strangers have disappeared. One almost wonders why he did not send his agents to search the different roads by which they could have gone, and compel them to come back. But that would have been a dangerous policy; for he would thereby have betrayed his hostility to the Messiah in

the very face of the religious feelings of the Jews. He could only, therefore, cherish his vexation secretly, and meditate revenge in the depths of his depraved heart.

But whilst, as yet, Herod's purposes were revealed to no man, they were known to God, and His providence watched over the Child with special care, and threw around Him a protecting shield. Not miraculously, however, did God preserve the Infant, as He might have done, but in an ordinary and very simple way; namely, by removing Him for a time to a distant land. The mind of Joseph was, no doubt, deeply anxious at this moment; and in the silence of that night he was perhaps meditating on these events, and especially on what the Magi had said respecting Herod, when he fell asleep and dreamed. In his dream an angel of the Lord appeared to him, and said, "Arise, and take the young Child and His mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy him." (Matt. ii. 13.) Dreams are mysterious things. There cannot be a doubt that some of them indicate a connection between the mind of man and the spiritual world; and, whatever may be the case now, they were formerly employed by God as one of the *media* by which He made known His will to His chosen people. This was the second of Joseph's

dreams; and doubtless the good man would be aroused by it immediately, and would proceed, ere the shades of the night had passed away, to discharge the task now so solemnly entrusted to him. And, indeed, the narrative informs us that he did so; for "when he arose, he took the young Child and His mother *by night*, and departed into Egypt." He did not hesitate for a moment, but fled immediately; for promptitude was enjoined by the words of the angel,* and any delay might have been attended with the greatest peril.

But why did not this dream occur to Mary? Because, as Stier observes, the guardian relationship of Joseph to the Child was now established, and Mary, according to the law of marriage, was now in subjection to her husband. It was a very willing subjection. She had perfect confidence in him; and when he aroused her from her slumbers, she did not scruple to place herself and her precious Babe under his fostering care, and to set out with him, even in the darkness of the night, on a long and somewhat perilous journey to the south. She believed in the dream which he no doubt related to her; and it was enough: her simple, child-like faith reposed in God; and if this was the way in which He chose to protect her Child, it was not for her to murmur, or ask why He chose it.

* Ἐγερθεὶς παράλαβε. (Matt. ii. 13.)

Nor should we ask why, save for the lesson which the answer gives. God could, we know, have prevented the necessity for this flight. He could have smitten Herod with instant death; He could have placed an angel near the Child, who would have been to Him as a wall of fire; or He could have rendered powerless any agents whom Herod might send to execute his deep-laid scheme: but Jesus was to be made in all things like unto His brethren, and to experience the sorrows even of infancy and childhood, that so He might sanctify to us early afflictions, and be our Exemplar in every stage of life.

According to our chronology, it was the month of March when the flight took place; a period of the year in which, as we have already seen, the weather would be comparatively mild, and in many respects favourable for such a journey. And now, having seated Mary and her Child upon an ass, Joseph leaves Bethlehem, walking by their side; for, as there was no room for them in the inn, there is now no room for them in all Judæa. O gentle mother, what a trial to thy faith! "Yet couldst thou not complain of the way whilst thy Saviour was with thee. His presence alone was able to make the stable a temple; Egypt a paradise; the way more pleasing than rest."* Yes, that Holy Family were happy even now; and the angel of the Lord was with them to pro-

* Bishop Hall's "Contemplations."

tect both the mother and the Child, and to bring them to their temporary hiding-place in peace.

Egypt was the only country to which Joseph could repair. It was not very far distant from Judæa, and was easily accessible by several roads. The fugitives would, perhaps, take that route which led through Hebron, a distance from Bethlehem of about thirteen miles; and here they would probably meet with friends who would escort them further on their way. A journey of about thirty-five miles, directly westward, would bring them to Gaza, whence a road lay by the Mediterranean coast to the river of Egypt, a stream flowing in the valley called Wadi-el-Aresh, and forming the southern boundary of the Holy Land.* Here there was a town called Rhinocolura, respecting which Messrs. Bonar and M'Cheyne observe, "We passed the remains of an old city, the foundations of which we could distinctly trace, though half buried in the sand."† It is supposed by some that Joseph proceeded with his charge no further than this town; and as there were many Jews in Egypt at this period, he would perhaps find some here who would afford him the rites of hospitality, and take a little interest in the mother and the Child. But tradition has fixed upon the village of Matarijah, near to Heliopolis, as the spot where the Holy

* Num. xxxiv. 5; Josh. xv. 4, 47.

† "Narrative," p. 86, 7th edit.

Family abode ; and here there is a sycamore-tree under which it is supposed they sat down to rest.”* It was here that, in the reign of Ptolemy Philometor, (B.C. 181—146,) Onias the high priest, having fled from Jerusalem, built a temple, by Ptolemy’s permission, with a view of uniting the Hellenistic Jews. According to Josephus, this temple was shut up by Lupus, the governor of Alexandria, after a lapse of 343 years ;† so that it must have been in existence at the time of Joseph’s flight. It is not necessary, however, to suppose that Joseph went so far into the country ; for, as his residence there must have been very brief, we are disposed to think that he remained just within its borders patiently waiting the summons to return.

“I was cast upon Thee from the womb : Thou art My God from My mother’s belly,” (Psalm xxii. 10,) is the language of one of the Messianic psalms. God’s providence was indeed

* In the spurious “ Gospel of the Infancy,” which probably belongs to the third century, it is said that under this sycamore-tree the Lord Jesus caused a well to spring forth, in which Mary washed His clothes ; that from the tree a balsam was produced which had cured many sick persons ; and that on Christ’s arrival in Egypt, some of the great idols of the country fell down, causing great consternation and fear to the inhabitants. Other miracles, according to this document, were also wrought by the Child Jesus in Egypt, but of such a character as not to be worth naming here.—See “ Jones on the Canon,” vol. ii., p. 166, &c.

† “ Wars,” vii., chap. x.

over the Holy Child,—in Bethlehem, in the journey through the wilderness, and now in Egypt, the land which had so often been a shelter to members of the chosen race. In Egypt Abraham found an asylum, when in Canaan there was a grievous famine; in Egypt Joseph, though taken there as a captive, was exalted to dignity and power; and in Egypt Jacob and his sons took up their abode, and multiplied into a nation numbering two millions of souls. True, it became to them “the house of bondage;” but it was a land to which the Israelites were not a little indebted; and now, after the lapse of so many centuries, it afforded a temporary home to the Child Jesus, whence He was to return to accomplish, in due time, the redemption of mankind from the thralldom of the wicked one and the power of sin.

The going down of Jesus to Egypt and His return took place, according to St. Matthew, “that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Out of Egypt have I called My Son.” This passage is found in Hosea xi. 1, and is quoted from the Hebrew,—“When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called My son out of Egypt.” “Thou shalt say unto Pharaoh,” said God to Moses, “Thus saith the Lord, Israel is My son, even My first-born: and I say unto thee, Let My son go, that he may serve Me: and if thou refuse to let him go,

behold, I will slay thy son, even thy first-born." (Exodus iv. 22, 23.) Now the Evangelist saw, in the collective people of Israel, a type of the Messiah; and in their deliverance from Egypt a typical prophecy of the event which he relates. "Out of Egypt," says Lange, "came the typical son of God, to found the theocracy; and thence, also, the true Son of God, to complete the theocracy." We pity those who can see no beauty or force in this, and who even quarrel with the Evangelist because they do not understand him. Was not everything typical under the Old Testament,—the sacrifices, the temple, the priesthood, and the people? And shall we either reject the second chapter of St. Matthew, as some rationalists would have us do, or charge the Evangelist with a far-fetched application of the words of the prophet to Christ? No: the exegesis of St. Matthew is perfectly correct. "It pleased the Father," observes Mill, "in preparing that work of mediation which should bring many sons unto glory, that the Captain of their salvation, the Only-begotten Son, should be led in His earliest years *literally* to Egypt; that He should there sojourn while His life was threatened in Palestine, and thence go forth when the time arrived for His resuming in Israel His nurture under the Law for man's redemption; even as it had been ordered of old that the infant Israel should be led thither 'to preserve life' from the famine

that ravaged Canaan, and thence depart in the newly-formed character of a *nation* Divinely governed, to keep the Lord's statutes in the good land of promise, and to be His witnesses in the world till the day of the actual redemption. The prophecy which tells immediately on the earlier event is, therefore, applicable, in the larger mind of the Spirit, to the later one. The same love to the ungrateful people commemorated by Hosea in that chapter, which was manifested in calling forth the representative first-born to be the model of nations, received a far grander and more perfect development, when He for whose sake alone Israel was made a peculiar people, the *only* Son of God, went forth from His exile to run His course of immaculate righteousness; thus to hasten that further consummation which this prophet declares—the spoiling of death and Hades, and the destruction of the empire of idolatry and sin in the world.”*

Leaving the Holy Family in Egypt, we must return for a moment to Bethlehem, to witness there the effects of Herod's cruelty and resentment. Seeing that he “was mocked of the wise men,” he “was exceeding wroth, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had dili-

* “*Pantheistic Principles*,” p. 330, 2d edit.

gently inquired of the wise men." It has been supposed that this note of age, "from two years old and under," implies that two years had elapsed since the wise men had first seen the star which indicated to them the birth of the Child; but it is far more probable that the tyrant took this long range of time in order to be sure of accomplishing his object: for this was the purpose on which he was bent,—to slay *that* Infant, the announcement of whose birth had caused him so much trouble; and he cared not how many children suffered if only that One was put to death. With the same object in view he included not the children that were in Bethlehem only, but those also in all the bounds thereof,—*ἐν πᾶσι τοῖς ὁρίοις αὐτῆς*,—an expression which may include a circuit of several miles. But male children only were the objects of his cruelty; though it is not improbable that, in the execution of their orders, his agents would lay hands also on some female children. We are not to suppose, however, that a very large number of children was slain. Tradition says that fourteen thousand were included in the massacre; but here tradition is decidedly at fault. Bethlehem, as we have seen, was but a very small town, and there would not probably be in it and in its suburbs more than thirty children of two years old and under; perhaps not so many. Yet what must have been the ferocity of the man that could thus recklessly

destroy even so many innocent babes in order to make sure of the destruction of one ?

The assassination took place, according to the notion of Lange and others, in the most secret manner. "It was spring, and the parents were, for the most part, occupied in the fields. Soon, however, first one, then another missed one of their children. One disappeared; another was found suffocated, poisoned, or stabbed and bathed in its blood."* The text seems to suggest this secrecy; and it is scarcely probable that Herod would send his agents openly, as that would have betrayed his anxiety to the people, and induced them to inquire into the motives of his conduct. With them he wished to keep on the best terms possible; and it was, doubtless, therefore, his wisest policy to hide within himself the views he entertained with regard to their expected Messiah. Josephus makes no mention of this massacre; and hence its historical accuracy has been called in question: but if it took place in the way we have suggested, his silence respecting it is by no means remarkable. And that Herod was capable of such an act of cruelty is sufficiently clear from the character given of him by that historian. He had waded to the throne through blood, and his reign was distinguished by acts of the vilest and most atrocious kind. He commanded Hyrcanus, the grandfather of his

* Lange's "Life of Christ," i., p. 395.

beautiful wife Mariamne, to be put to death; Mariamne herself, "a woman of an excellent character, both for chastity and greatness of soul," was sacrificed to his jealousy at a later period; (B. C. 6;) her two sons, Alexander and Aristobulus, were also slain; and, five days before he died, his eldest son, Antipater, was ordered for execution,* which took place, therefore, about the same time as the slaughter of the innocents. "It is better to be Herod's hog than his son," said Augustus, when he heard of these children being put to death,—a jest related by Macrobius, in his "*Saturnalia*," who appears to have supposed that Antipater was one of the slain. Thus the character of Herod is depicted; and his place on the page of history is by the side of the greatest monsters that have ever disgraced humanity. Sad is it to think that in later times, and even in so-called Christian lands, acts of even greater atrocity should have been perpetrated by the hands of men. But if Herod is held up to the scorn and detestation of the world, shall not Philip of Spain, who sentenced to death the whole of the population of the Netherlands, (a few only excepted,) men, women, and children, be regarded with similar feelings? Shall not a like estimate be formed of the Duke of Alva, who gloated over the victims of his cruelty, numbering tens of thousands of human beings, many of them

* "*Antiq.*" xv. 6, 7; xvi. 2; xvii. 5.

the most devoted patriots of their age? and of Charles IX., who signed the decree for the massacre of St. Bartholomew, which doomed to destruction from seventy-five to a hundred thousand of the Protestants of France? Where will men of this sort be found in the day that God shall make inquisition for blood? "I saw under the altar," says St. John, "the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held: and they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost Thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth? And white robes were given unto every one of them; and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellow servants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled." (Rev. vi. 9—11.) Vengeance, then, on the persecutors of God's people is but delayed for awhile. In the end it will come; and then shall the Herods, and the Cæsars, and the Philips, who imbrued their hands in the blood of innocent men, know, as indeed they doubtless know already, that God is a God of justice, and that by Him actions are weighed.

But are the infants slain in Bethlehem to be ranked among the martyrs? So the early Church thought; for she set apart a day for the commemoration of the Innocents, the Epistle for which is Rev. xiv. 1—4, and the Gospel Matt. ii. 13.

"These were redeemed from among men, being the first fruits unto God and to the Lamb," are words which she thus applies to the slaughtered children: and Wheatley observes, "As there are three kinds of martyrdom,—the first both in will and deed, which is the highest; the second in will but not in deed; the third in deed but not in will: so the Church commemorates these martyrs in the same order,—St. Stephen first, who suffered death both in will and deed; St. John the Evangelist next, who suffered martyrdom in will but not in deed; the holy Innocents last, who suffered in deed but not in will."* Can any one object to this view? Is it not a beautiful thought that these infants, having never committed actual transgression, and having died neither in the course of nature nor for any crime of theirs or of their parents, but merely for the sake of the new-born Saviour, should be accounted worthy, not only of admission into the kingdom of heaven, into which all children dying in infancy are admitted, but of a place among the martyrs next the throne? O blessed infants! born, baptized in their own blood, and then welcomed by angels to the skies; they suffered for a moment, but escaped the sufferings of a longer life, and their spirits, spotless as the light, were presented before the

* "On the Book of Common Prayer," p. 190—211, Bohn's edit.

throne, as the firstfruits of a harvest plenteous and full.

The souls of these innocents were at rest; but deep was the sorrow of the mothers of Bethlehem for the loss of their beloved offspring. A mother's love! Who can describe its tenderness and depth? "Can a woman forget her suckling child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb?" The question is asked as if such a thing were all but impossible. Hence, among Jewish mothers especially, the loss of children was ever deemed one of the saddest of calamities; and no wonder, therefore, that the cruel deed of Herod caused many hearts to bleed and many tears to flow. And in their sorrow St. Matthew sees the accomplishment of another significant prediction. "Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremy the prophet, saying, In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not."

The passage is cited, though not literally, from Jeremiah xxxi. 15, and refers originally to the times of the Babylonish captivity. Ramah was situated in the territory of Benjamin; and thence Nebuzaradan led away captive many people in chains, Jeremiah himself having been bound, but afterwards set free and permitted

to go where he chose. (Jerem. xl. 1—6.) Many children were at that time torn from their mother's breasts; and many families were sundered, probably to meet no more. Hence the prophet, by a striking *prosopopœia*, represents Rachel, the mother of Benjamin, as yet alive, or as rising from her tomb, which was near to Bethlehem, and weeping for her children with inconsolable grief. For, as Rachel was a sorrowing mother at the birth of Benjamin, and with her dying breath called him Benoni, so were there many sorrowing mothers in Ramah and the neighbourhood, when, by the command of the king of Babylon, their little ones were snatched from their embrace.

And now again a similar scene of distress is witnessed in Bethlehem;—Rachel mourns again, and again refuses to be comforted; and the Evangelist speaks of the fact as a fulfilment of Jeremiah's prophecy. On what principle is this said? On a principle of accommodation, or in accordance with a system of prophetic interpretation adopted by the Rabbins? * No: the Holy Spirit, by whose inspiration the prophet spoke and wrote, had not only in mind the first scene of grief among the mothers of Benjamin and Judæa, occasioned by their being bereft of their children in the days of Nebuzar-adan, but the second also, when they sorrowed

* Alford, in loco.

on account of the cruel act of Herod, which filled them with even sharper anguish.* And, indeed, as Lange strikingly observes, "the wail of Rachel is renewed in the Church as often as the witnesses of the truth are put to death by carnal and worldly men who profess to be the representatives of the Church."†

But the prophet goes on to comfort Rachel, and says, "Thus saith the Lord, Refrain thy voice from weeping, and thine eyes from tears: for thy work shall be rewarded, saith the Lord; and they shall come again from the land of the enemy. And there is hope in thine end, saith the Lord, that thy children shall come again to their own border." The captivity was to last for seventy years; and then those who survived would be permitted to return to Judæa, and the sorrowing Rachel would thus receive back her long-lost sons. Was there no such consolation for Rachel now? St. Matthew makes no allusion to it: yet surely it was implied; for, as Mill observes, the promise was applicable "in a higher sense to the representative mother with respect to children taken out of this world by tyrannic power." Very few of the mothers of Judæa would receive back their children from the captivity in Babylon; but there was not a mother in Bethlehem and its suburbs who by the cruelty of Herod had lost a son, who, if

* Mill, p. 326. † "Com.," in loco.

saved herself through the redemption wrought out by the Saviour, would not one day receive him back in a brighter and better world.

One of the greatest of England's divines of the sixteenth century, Dr. Thomas Jackson, whose writings deserve to be much better known than they are, has a singular but striking notion respecting these innocents. "If there were no other way," he observes, "to solve the literal and exact fulfilling of this last clause,—*Thy children shall return again to their own border*,—we might maintain it as more probable than any other interpretation that they which can contradict this can make of our Evangelist, that amongst those *many bodies of the saints which after our Saviour's resurrection awaked out of their sleeps, and came out of their graves into the holy city*, Rachel was one, and there received these her martyred children, raised to life again. It holds very good analogy with the sweet disposition of Divine Providence, and therefore with the doctrine of faith, to think, as these infants were the first to witness Christ's birth by their bloody death, so they should first be partakers of His second birth, and companions of His joyful resurrection."* It is a beautiful thought, and, though but a conjecture only, may be very innocently entertained; for who they really were that arose from their graves on the

* Works, vol. vi., p. 298, Oxford edit.

memorable day of our Lord's resurrection we are not informed, and it is by no means improbable that these infants were among the number. But whether they were or not, we may be sure that He, for whose sake they suffered, took care of their souls, and provided for them a secure resting-place in the paradise of God.

But what of Herod, the perpetrator of this bloody deed? Josephus has given a most minute and circumstantial account of his last days, than which nothing more admonitory is to be found on the page of history. Though in very many instances the wicked have "no bands in their death," yet had such a man died an ordinary death, we might have been somewhat surprised. But, as if Providence would set a mark upon his name, to be observed by all future generations, Herod died but a short time after the slaughter of the innocents, amidst insupportable agonies, both of body and of mind. We have seen that on the night of an eclipse of the moon, or the 13th of March, B.C. 4, Herod burnt alive those who had instigated the pulling down of the golden eagle; and now a distemper under which he suffered became more and more severe, so that a fire glowed slowly in his frame, causing an appetite for eating which nothing could appease. His physicians sent him to the warm baths of Callirrhoe, beyond the Jordan; and once they bathed him in a vessel full of oil.

But he could obtain no relief. The agonies he suffered made him rave like a madman ; and when he felt that his end was drawing near, true to his character to the last, he commanded all the principal men in Judæa to be called, ordered them to be shut up in the hippodrome, and then charged his sister Salome and her husband, Alexis, to cause all who were in custody to be shot with darts as soon as he was dead, that there might be a great mourning and lamentation through the land on his demise. A little later he attempted suicide ; then he commanded his son Antipater to be slain ; and five days after this he died, as he had lived, a monster of cruelty and crime. His orders respecting those shut up in the hippodrome were not carried out ; but a sumptuous funeral was prepared by his son Archelaus, and he was carried from Jericho, where his death took place, to Herodium, a distance of a mile, on a golden bier embroidered with precious stones, and covered over with purple, followed by a magnificent retinue of soldiers ; and there buried, no one lamenting his loss.*

* "Antiq.," book xvii., chaps. 6—8.



CHAPTER IX.



THE HOLY CHILD AT NAZARETH.

ACCORDING to the terms of his last will and testament, the kingdom of Herod the Great was divided at his death among three of his sons,—Herod Philip II., Herod Antipas, and Herod Archelaus.

Herod Philip, whose mother's name was Cleopatra, obtained the tetrarchy of Batania and Auranitis, &c., over which he reigned thirty-seven years. Herod Antipas, a son of Malthace, a Samaritan woman, became tetrarch of Galilee and Peræa; and to Herod Archelaus, another son of Malthace, was assigned the kingdom of Judæa, which his father, by a former will, had purposed to bestow on Herod Antipas.

Archelaus was at first received by the people with great satisfaction. He proceeded to the temple, took his seat on a golden throne, and courteously addressed the multitudes, promising them that he would prove himself a better man than his father. At Jericho the military would

have put the crown upon his head; but he declined it until Cæsar, who, by the will of Herod, had been declared supreme, should confirm the succession.

At this juncture the Holy Family was in Egypt; but now "an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph, saying, Arise, and take the young Child and His mother, and go into the land of Israel: for they are dead which sought the young Child's life." (Matt. ii. 20.) It was probably the same angel who had appeared to him before; for he had said, "Be thou there," or remain in Egypt, "until I bring thee word:" and the command now given is not, as before, "Flee," but simply, "Arise, and go;" for now Joseph could return as leisurely as he deemed fit. It would, no doubt, be a welcome message to the foster-father of the Child; for there were few attractions for him in Egypt,—all his hopes and desires being centred in "the land of Israel." He knew that there his precious Charge was to grow up and to accomplish the redemption of the people; and hence, gladly as he had taken Him to Egypt to escape the rage of Herod, now that Herod was dead, he would still more gladly return with Him to his own land, which was endeared both to him and to Mary by so many hallowed associations.

When Moses was in the land of Midian, God said to him, "Go, return into Egypt; for all the

men are dead which sought thy life :”* and now, as if referring to these words, the angel says, “They are dead which sought the young Child’s life.” Pharaoh and Herod—what a vast interval had elapsed between their histories ! Yet they were like-minded men ; for, as the one sought the life of Moses, the other sought the life of Jesus ; but as the one was baffled by a flight from Egypt, the other was baffled by a flight into Egypt : the wise being taken in their own craftiness, and their deep-laid schemes being utterly overthrown. Moses was here a type of Christ ; and Joseph may have recalled his history to mind, and have been encouraged by thinking of the Providence which so remarkably took care of one who was exposed to so much peril.

The angel might have informed Joseph of the manner of Herod’s death ; but he is perfectly silent on this point, as also is the Evangelist St. Matthew ; and only in the pages of the secular historian is that sad story told. It was enough for Joseph to be assured that the cruel monarch was no more ; and at once “he arose, and took the young Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel.” He would doubtless journey back by the same route that he had taken when he came ; and, at first, he was disposed to re-enter Bethlehem, intending pro-

* Exod. iv. 19. The plural is used in both instances, “they are dead,” in accordance with an almost universal custom.

bably to take up his abode in the little city where the Child was born. But such was not the will of God. Bethlehem was too near Jerusalem, and therefore too public a place for the residence of the Saviour during His early years; and not in Bethlehem, but in a little town in Galilee, He was to grow up to man's estate. Another reason, however, actuated the mind of Joseph; for "when he heard that Archelaus did reign in Judæa, in the room of his father Herod, he was afraid to go thither: notwithstanding, being warned of God in a dream, he turned aside into the parts of Galilee."

The fears of Joseph respecting Archelaus arose, no doubt, from his being informed that he was little better than his father Herod, and would therefore be just as likely "to seek the young Child's life." That the disposition of Archelaus was cruel and revengeful, we have ample evidence in the pages of Josephus. Scarcely had he entered on the government, ere the populace of Jerusalem made large demands upon him of various kinds, and especially clamoured for vengeance on the persons whom Herod had promoted. He sought to appease them, but in vain; and during the feast of the Passover, which just then occurred, he let loose upon them his entire army, and three thousand persons were slain while in the act of offering sacrifice, and many more compelled to take refuge in the

mountains. On repairing to Rome, he was confirmed by Augustus in the government of Judæa, under the title of Ethnarch : but he held it only nine years ; for, being accused before the Emperor by the Jews and the Samaritans of great cruelties, he was banished to Vienne, a town in Gaul, and his property confiscated to the imperial treasury. It is said that, a few days before he was summoned to take his trial, he had a dream in which he saw nine full ears of corn devoured by oxen ; and that, on consulting the diviners, Simon, an Essæan, interpreted the dream as intimating that he would reign just as many years as there were ears of corn.*

The Passover at which this slaughter of the people by the army of Archelaus took place was probably past when Joseph came back with his charge from Egypt ; and the tidings of it would perhaps lead him to conclude that it would not be safe to remain within the territories of such a monarch. He was wondering in himself what he should do, when, for the fourth time, he was instructed in a dream to repair to Galilee, whence, but three or four months before, he had come with Mary to the enrolment at Bethlehem. What route he took we are not informed, nor is it of importance that we should know. But we can well suppose that both Joseph and Mary were now the subjects of peculiar emotions.

* Josephus, " Wars," ii. 1—7.

Through what scenes had they passed since they left Nazareth ! What wondrous events had taken place in their history ! The promised Saviour had been born ; shepherds of the plain had done Him homage ; Simeon and Anna, in the temple, had rejoiced on His account ; and wise men from the East had presented to Him their choicest gifts. Moreover that Child had been preserved from the cruelty of Herod ; had been watched over by Providence in the journey to Egypt, and in the return ; and He was still in Mary's arms, the object of her fondest attachment, and the subject of her most anxious thoughts. O, to have heard the conversation of the mother and the foster-father, as hour after hour, in the bright sunshine of the season, they journeyed on towards Galilee, and at length drew near to the little town where the angel visited Mary and announced to her the wondrous birth ! To both of them the Child was the object of purest love. With a full heart would Mary look upon Him ; and though Joseph was but the reputed father of the Child, yet he too viewed Him with the deepest interest, and regarded Him with the highest reverence, knowing that He was the Son of God and the Saviour of the world.

In Galilee, whither Joseph now bent his steps, Herod Antipas reigned as Tetrarch. He was a man similar in character to the rest of the Herodian family ; but his government was some-

what milder than that of Archelaus, and in his territories Joseph would not have much cause to fear. Galilee was that part of the land of Canaan which originally fell to the lot of Naph-tali and Asher; but in the time of our Lord it embraced the whole of the territory which included also the lots of Zebulon and Issachar. It was bounded on the west by Phœnicia; on the north by Syria and the range of the Lebanon; on the east by the Jordan and the lakes Huleh and Gennesareth; and on the south by Samaria; the boundary-line running from Mount Carmel on the west, and by the extreme edge of the great plain of Esdraelon, towards Bethshan, near the Jordan. The name Galilee is from גליל *galal*, "to roll," and may denote the hilly or undulating region.

Nazareth has no history prior to the time of which we write. It is nowhere mentioned in the Old Testament, nor is it ever noticed by Josephus. Into this obscure town the Child Jesus came and dwelt, "that," says St. Matthew, "it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene." Now no one of the prophets has said this in so many words; but what have the prophets generally said? They have predicted, as with one voice, the lowliness of the Messiah, calling Him emphatically "the Branch" that should "grow out of the roots" of Jesse;*

* Isaiah xi. 1.

and saying, "He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: He hath no form nor comeliness, and when we shall see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him."* Now the Hebrew word for "branch" is *nezer* (נֶזֶר), and this was, undoubtedly, the root from which the word Nazareth was derived; whence a Jewish writer, quoted by Hengstenberg, says, A Nazarene is he who is born in the town of Nezer, in Galilee, three days' journey from Jerusalem. And why was this name given to the place? Because it was overgrown with low bushes; and that which these low bushes were when compared with the stately trees which adorned other parts of the country, Nazareth was when compared with other cities.† Can any good thing come out of Nazareth? said Nathanael to Philip; a question which implied that, in the estimation of many, the place was exceedingly poor and mean. Its character agreed with its name, and it was thought that no one of any reputation could ever spring from so insignificant a spot.

Another interpretation has been given to the words "He shall be called a Nazarene." It has been supposed that the word is identical in meaning with "Nazarite," and that, like Samson, Samuel, and John the Baptist, our Lord was to

* Isaiah liii. 2: compare Ezek. xvii. 22—24; Zech. iii. 8; vi. 12.

† Hengstenberg's "Christology," vol ii., p. 106, &c. Clark.

adopt an ascetic mode of life, and to drink neither wine nor strong drink; but this view is at once refuted by the fact that whilst John the Baptist came neither eating nor drinking, Jesus never took on Him the vow of a Nazarite, and never lived in the manner of the Nazarites, either of earlier or of later times.*

But the former interpretation has everything in its favour, and has been accepted by critics of the highest order. "The Redeemer of Israel," says Dr. Mill, in a passage which I quote with pleasure, "who under the title of either נֶזֶר (*Nezer*), or its synonym, צֶמַח (*Tsemach*), is characterized expressly by three at least of the great ancient prophets as a future 'Branch' of that house,—to accomplish for that royal stock, when apparently extinct and dead, a restoration far greater and more permanent than that of his type Zorobabel, and to plant a kingdom of righteousness and peace on the earth, of which even that of his progenitor David was but an inferior resemblance,—this Branch was to be matured in a strangely-mysterious process for these high destinies. He was to 'grow up,' in the first instance, as the chief of these prophets declared, 'as a tender plant, and a root out of a dry ground;' to be without 'form or comeliness,' having none of those decent splendours of outward condition that might attract the

* See Matthew xi. 18, 19.

house of Israel to regard and acknowledge Him as their Sovereign. And as the necessary means of this, His youth and opening manhood should be passed, not in Judæa, but in the northern province, termed in Isaiah's day Galilee of the Gentiles, and in one of its least-reputed towns. His origination from David, and from Bethlehem, the city of David's house, was to be concealed at first from all ordinary eyes, under the character of the carpenter's son of Nazareth."

Respecting Nazareth itself almost every traveller who has visited it speaks with enthusiasm. The old topographer, Quaresmius, says, Nazareth is a rose; like a rose, has the same rounded form, enclosed by mountains, as the flower by its leaves. It is shut in on all sides by fourteen gently-rounded eminences, which encircle it, like the edge of a shell, to guard it from intrusion. These eminences, which are composed of white limestone, are connected with a range of hills at the northern end of the great plain of Esdraelon; and the present representative of Nazareth,—En Nazirah,—the most modern town in Palestine, stands on the steep slope of the south-western side of the valley, whereas the ancient city stood nearer the brow of the hill, where many traces of buildings are still observed. Outside the town is a fountain, to which many of the inhabitants resort. It is called the Fountain of the Virgin; and over its source, which is a little

further north, stands the Greek church of the Annunciation, where, it is said, the angel Gabriel saluted Mary.

There is nothing attractive in the appearance of the town, nor is it probable that there was in the days of our Lord. It was like most Jewish towns of that period,—somewhat rude and unsightly; and its inhabitants were, doubtless, very disreputable and wild. Its heat for many months of the year was excessive; and, within the town, the horizon was bounded on every side by the hills which enclosed the basin wherein it stood.

But its environs were most charming, and the prospect from the summit of the hills above the town is one of the most glorious in all Palestine. On the south and south-east is the magnificent plain of Esdraelon, on which are seen the rounded dome of Tabor, and the little Hermon. Further eastward is the deep valley of the Jordan, and the sea of Galilee, backed by the lofty plains of Gaulonitis and Peræa. To the north-east is caught a glimpse of Cæsarea Philippi, and beyond it the majestic Hermon in his robe of snow; whilst directly north are the hills and mountains forming the continuation of the range of Lebanon. And to the west is the range of Carmel, dipping its foot into the Great Sea, and forming one side of the beautiful bay of Akka, the scene of many struggles in former and in recent times.

Within this horizon several towns and villages were formerly included. In the north, Safed, the city set on a hill; Cana of Galilee; and Seffuriah, the Sephoris of Josephus, and the Dio-Cæsarea of the Romans, supposed to have been the abode of Joachim and Anna, the traditional parents of the Virgin Mary; and in the south Jenin, Jezreel, Taanach, and Megiddo are still distinctly visible.

“Seating myself,” says Dr. Robinson, “by the side of the well,” (called Neby Ismail, by which the western hill is crowned,) “I remained for some hours upon this spot, lost in the contemplation of the wide prospect, and of the events connected with the scenes around. In the village below, the Saviour of the world had passed His childhood; and although we have few particulars of His life during those early years, yet there are certain features of nature which meet our eyes now, just as they once met His. He must often have visited the fountain near which we pitched our tent; His feet must frequently have wandered over the adjacent hills; and His eyes doubtless have gazed upon the splendid prospect from this very spot. Here the Prince of Peace looked down upon the great plain, where the din of battles so oft had rolled, and the garments of the warrior had been dyed with blood; and He looked out, too, upon that sea, over which the swift ships were to bear the

tidings of His salvation to nations and to continents then unknown. How has the moral aspect of things been changed! Battles and bloodshed have indeed not ceased to desolate this unhappy country, and gross darkness now covers the people; but from this region a light went forth, which has enlightened the world and unveiled new climes; and now the rays of that light begin to be reflected back from distant isles and continents, to illuminate anew the darkened land where it first sprang up.”*

But this quotation somewhat anticipates the thread of the history, and we must return again to Joseph, Mary, and the Holy Child. In Nazareth the parents had previously dwelt, and in Nazareth they again took up their abode. Joseph was by trade a carpenter; and we may therefore suppose that his home would be an humble one, and that the infancy and childhood of Jesus were spent in a very lowly manner. Many Christian children are poor, but few, perhaps, know less of the comforts of life than He did; and to the numerous temporal blessings with which many English children are favoured, He certainly was an entire stranger. His miraculous birth would, of course, be concealed from the inhabitants of the town, and He would pass among them as the son of Joseph and Mary; and perhaps they would feel no more interest in Him

* “*Researches*,” vol. ii., p. 337, 2d edit.

than in any other child of the village, and seldom would He be noticed except by the immediate circle of His friends.

But to Mary and to Joseph He was the one object of delight. Mary nursed Him. He hung upon her breast. She watched Him as He slept, and was by His side when He awoke. She first heard Him lisp the name of God; and from her, as we cannot but suppose, He received, as a child, lessons in Divine truth. Respecting Him during this period of His history the Evangelist St. Luke observes, "And the Child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon Him." He was, then, truly human; and a truly human Child. He possessed a human soul, the powers of which were gradually developed; so that when He was a Child He spake as a child, He understood as a child, He thought as a child.

It is altogether impossible to form a right conception of what the infant Jesus was; yet it is highly important that we should keep in view His proper humanity; and, therefore, we must not picture to ourselves an ideal Child, different in every respect from all other children. Different He was in some respects, but we have no reason to suppose that there was anything forced or precocious in His character. Doubtless He said and did many things which were remarkable; but He wrought no miracles, nor are

any of His sayings as a child recorded, save the one which he uttered at twelve years of age. The fables still extant respecting Him, in the so-called Gospel of the Infancy, form a perfect contrast to the naturalness and simplicity of the few facts recorded by the Sacred Writers. What can be more puerile than the story that a boy named Judas, into whom Satan had entered in the form of a dog, struck Jesus on the right side, so that He cried out, and in a moment Satan went out of the boy? or than another, to the effect that on a certain day several boys were moulding clay into the forms of birds and beasts, on which Jesus formed some sparrows, and then made them fly? * We only name these stories to show their silliness. But these apocryphal gospels are full of such things; invented by men calling themselves Christians, to gratify that false taste for the marvellous so wide-spread in the first ages of the Church, and, alas! by no means wanting in this the nineteenth century of the Christian era. The genuine Gospels are almost silent respecting these early years of our Lord: but their very silence is a proof of the inspiration of the writers; for, had those writers been left to themselves, nothing is more probable than that they would have said more relative to this period of the Saviour's life. Doubtless Mary could have given the Evangelists

* See "Jones on the Canon," vol. ii., p. 203, &c.

some incidents connected with the childhood of her Son; but the Holy Spirit sealed either *her* lips or *theirs*, and thus prevented the publication of such things as were to be kept secret.

We have said that the Child Jesus was like other children of His age; but there was one respect in which He differed from them all. He was the HOLY CHILD Jesus. Though human, He was sinless. Though a partaker of our nature, He was free from original guilt, and was innocent of all transgression. He was ever patient, ever kind, ever truthful; and though He was subject to the pain and suffering incident to humanity, He never murmured, was never fretful, and never, either in word or thought, grieved His Father who was in heaven. Every other child could say, "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me;" but He could not. Of every other child it might be said, "He goeth astray as soon as he is born, speaking lies;" but it could not be said of Him. He had, as other children have, temptations to meet, and trials to encounter; but the prince of this world came and had nothing in Him. There was no response to his suggestions; there was no predisposition to yield to his attacks. For Jesus was Divine as well as human,—God as well as man. He was such from His birth. The Deity was enshrined even in His infant form. "It pleased the Father that in Him should all fulness

dwell." We must not, in our anxiety to maintain the humanity of our Lord, lose sight of His Divinity, as some have done. The development of His human spirit was, as we shall show hereafter, gradual and progressive; but it took place under circumstances perfectly unique. No other child's mind was ever developed in the same way. He "grew" in body, He "waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom: and the grace of God was upon Him;" for He was God's beloved Son, and "the Spirit of Jehovah rested upon Him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of Jehovah." (Isaiah xi. 2.) He was, therefore, "of quick understanding in the fear of the Lord;" and even at twelve years of age, as we shall presently see, displayed unusual thoughtfulness, and such an apprehension of Divine truth as astonished the Jewish Rabbis in the temple.

The childhood of Jesus was, then, a super-human childhood. He was a flower ordained, in the wisdom of God, to bloom, for a time, on the soil of earth,—to be trampled on by the feet of men, and ultimately to be cut down; but afterwards to spring forth again, and to become a plant of renown, even the tree of life, to all the nations of the earth. O blessed childhood! And through this period of human life our Saviour passed that He might know, by experience, what

a child's life is, and that He might learn to sympathize with children in their sorrows. No wonder that He who was such a child said, when He was a man, "Suffer the little children to come unto Me;" and even now that He is exalted to the right hand of power He is touched with the feeling of our children's infirmities, and bids us take care that we offend not one of the little ones.



CHAPTER X.



THE HOLY CHILD WITH THE DOCTORS IN THE TEMPLE.

THREE times a year were the Jews required, by the law of Moses, to go up to Jerusalem, there to observe the great festivals of the nation. Jerusalem was the metropolis of the land, and the place which God had chosen to put His name there. There stood the temple, where alone sacrifices could be offered, and where alone were the symbols of the Divine presence. Synagogues existed in every town, at least in the times of which we write; and in them prayers could be offered, and the law read; but only in Jerusalem, only in the temple, could the burnt offerings, and the sin offerings, and the trespass offerings be presented; and therefore to Jerusalem must the people go to sacrifice unto the Lord their God.

The great festivals were those of the Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles; of which the first was the most important, being instituted to

commemorate the deliverance of the Israelites out of Egypt on that terrible night when the angel of death went through the land and smote the first-born of the Egyptians, but passed over the houses of the Israelites and smote not their first-born. It was celebrated for seven days,—from the 15th to the 21st of the month Abib or Nisan, (April,)—during the whole of which period the people ate only unleavened bread. This festival Joseph and Mary had attended annually, from the time that they settled in the quiet little town of Nazareth; (Luke ii. 41;) or, it may be that Joseph went alone, as it is scarcely probable that Mary would leave the Child Jesus to the care of others for so long a time. But in the year 8 of the Christian era, (A.U.C. 762,) Jesus, being then twelve years of age, accompanied them to Jerusalem for the first time. At that age a boy was called by the Jews a son of the law, (Ben-atorah,) and was considered bound to observe its rites and ceremonies. Let a man deal gently with his son until he come to be twelve years old, but from that time let him descend with him into his way of living, was a Jewish saying;* and, accordingly, boys of that age were subject to more control, and were especially called to submit themselves to the yoke. And now the time had come when Jesus was to enter on this higher stage of life. How would His

* Quoted by Lightfoot, "Works," vol. xii., p. 41.

heart bound as, at the beginning of the month, He heard those around Him reminding each other of the approaching festival.

The people went up to the city in groups or companies, for mutual protection and greater pleasure. Very delightful must it have been to stand upon some lofty eminence, and to watch them wending their way, in smaller or larger companies, to the metropolis of the land; sometimes singing as they went one of the step-songs of the Psalmists: as, "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, whence cometh my help;" or, "I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the Lord. Our feet shall stand within thy gates, O Jerusalem." (Ps. cxxi., cxxii.) In such a company Jesus and His parents travelled: and happier far would be their pilgrimage than that of many others who went with them; for they would walk in the very brightest beams of the countenance of God, and would know that they were under His special guardianship and care.

They would probably go by Jenin, a distance of six hours and twenty minutes; thence by Nablous, seven hours and fifty-five minutes further; and thence to Shafat, eleven hours further still: and here, on coming to a kind of swell, they would obtain the first sight of the Holy City, by far the finest view that is anywhere to be seen. They would reach it on the second

or third day after leaving Nazareth; repeating perhaps, as many did, the salutation of the Psalmist, "Peace be within thy walls, and prosperity within thy palaces. For my brethren and companions' sakes, I will now say, Peace be within thee!" And entering it by the Damascus gate, they might say, "Beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth, is Mount Zion, on the sides of the north, the city of the great King." This would be, in all probability, on the 13th of the month; and from that day to the close of the festival the family would lodge somewhere in the city, or, it may be, in a tent outside the walls. Vast crowds of people would be there; and strange would be the scenes on which the eye of the Child Jesus would now, for the first time, gaze.

Archelaus, as we have seen, had already been banished by the Emperor of Rome, (A.U.C. 759,) and Judæa was now a Roman province. Coponius, a man of the Equestrian order, had just been appointed governor, under Quirinus the prefect of Syria; but Cæsarea was the seat of government, and in that city Coponius had, in all probability, taken up his abode. About this time the high priest Joazar was deposed by Quirinus; and Annas, or Ananus, the son of Seth, appointed in his stead. Josephus relates an incident which may have occurred this very year. During the feast of unleavened bread it

was customary for the priests to open the temple-gates just after midnight; when some of the Samaritans who had come to Jerusalem privately threw dead men's bodies about the cloisters, in consequence of which they were ever after excluded from the temple, and greater care was taken to preserve it from being thus defiled.*

To the temple Jesus would, no doubt, be wishful to repair as soon after He entered the city as possible. He already knew it as His Father's house; and we may be sure that He would long to tread its courts, and to witness its solemnities, even at the commencement of the week which He was to spend at Jerusalem. What temple was it? It was that magnificent structure built by Herod, on the site of the temples of Solomon and Zerubbabel, in the south-western angle of what is now called the Haram area; but it was twice as large as the former erections, and in some respects far more imposing. Its style of architecture was identical with that of the temples of Persepolis and Susa; and "whatever," says Mr. Ferguson, "the exact appearance of its details may have been, it may be safely asserted that the triple temple of Jerusalem—the lower court, standing on its magnificent terraces; the inner court, raised on its platform in the centre of this; and the temple itself, rising out of this group, and crowning the whole

* See "Antiq.," xviii., chap. ii.

—must have formed, when combined with the beauty of its situation, one of the most splendid architectural combinations of the ancient world.”*

The building of this temple was commenced in the eighteenth year of the reign of Herod the Great, and was not completed until A.D. 64, under the reign of Herod Agrippa II. Consequently it was now in course of erection, and workmen would be seen (if during the passover they did not suspend their labours) employed in various parts of the edifice, but principally, if not solely, in the outer courts. These outer courts Jesus perhaps entered, in company with His parents; and, looking towards the inner court, He would observe the priests presenting the morning or the evening sacrifice; whilst beyond that court He would see the temple itself,† and the vail which hung before the entrance, within which was the second vail and the holiest of all, never entered save by the high priest once a year.

On the fifteenth day of the month the pass-over itself was observed. A lamb was set apart on the tenth day, and on the evening of the fourteenth day was slain and eaten by a company of persons in accordance with the command, “Every man according to his eating shall make your count for the lamb.” (Exod. xii. 4.)

* Smith’s “Dictionary of the Bible,” vol. iii., p. 1464.

† The ναός as distinct from the ἱερόν. See Archbishop Trench’s “Synonyms of the New Testament,” p. 10.

Women, though not bound to attend the annual festivals, were permitted to do so, and, if present, were required to sit down at the paschal feast. It is certain, then, that, on this occasion, Jesus for the first time sat down with Mary, Joseph, and a few other friends, to partake of a lamb thus slain. The lamb was slain by the priests within the temple, and its blood sprinkled on the altar as an atonement for sin; after which, the body of the lamb was taken home and roasted whole, and then eaten with bitter herbs. Jesus, being sinless, needed no atonement; yet thus it became Him to fulfil all righteousness; for He was made under the law, and must therefore submit to its several requirements and demands. Did His prophetic eye look forward to the last paschal feast which He would celebrate twenty-one years later? and did He already think of Himself as the true Paschal Lamb, whom His Father had already chosen to be offered up for the sins of the people? Who can tell? Here again the Evangelists are silent. Of what Jesus saw, and heard, and felt, during this paschal feast, they utter not a word; and only one single fact is recorded, but that a most significant one, connected with His visit to the Holy City.

We refer, of course, to St. Luke ii. 43—50. The words, "When they had fulfilled the days," imply that the parents of Jesus remained in

Jerusalem until the close of the feast of unleavened bread. That feast being over, they set out on their return to Nazareth. Another company, probably of youths, had set out before them; and as Jesus had, perhaps, associated with these youths before, Joseph and Mary naturally supposed that He would be with them now, and therefore were not at all anxious respecting Him, though He was not under the immediate notice of their eye. But He tarried behind. Jerusalem and its temple had attractions for Him of no ordinary kind; and whilst His parents were again on the road to Nazareth He was in one of the temple-courts, sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions. Let us pause here, and try to realise the scene. These doctors were some of the Rabbis, or teachers, who were accustomed to sit in an apartment of the temple holding disputations concerning the law. They were not necessarily members of the Sanhedrim; but, in all probability, several of them were such. The title "Rabbi" only began to be used during the reign of Herod the Great; and took its rise in connection with the two schools of Shammai and Hillel, between which there was much difference of opinion on questions of the most foolish kind. The Rabbis among whom Jesus was found were probably sitting in a room connected with the court of the women; for beyond that court

females were not allowed to pass. It was next to the court of the Israelites, and was entered by one of those gates which stood respectively on the north, south, and east of the temple.

How Jesus obtained access to the doctors we are not informed ; but He may have been introduced by one of their number with whom he had previously engaged in conversation. And though, at this time, the disciples of the Rabbis usually *stood* when in their presence, Jesus was admitted to a seat among them ; for by His conversation and deportment He had won their confidence, and gained their high esteem. It must not be supposed that He addressed them in a bold and domineering manner: "that," as Olshausen observes, "would have been an anomaly which the God of order would never have exhibited." No ; but as a child He heard them, and asked them questions. They were, perhaps, reading a roll of one of the books of Moses or of the Prophets, and giving their comments upon it ; and Jesus listened, and then asked them for yet further light. In rightly asking questions the profoundest wisdom is frequently displayed ; and the questions of Jesus related to none of the frivolous matters in dispute among these doctors, — to none of the foolish traditions of their fathers, — but were of so grave a nature as to excite the astonishment of all who heard them, and to lead them, in their turn, to ask questions

of Him. Here the Gospel of the Infancy again obtrudes its follies, and says that one of the doctors asked Him if He had studied astronomy, and another if He was acquainted with philosophy and physics, on which He gave them the most wonderful replies ! What a contrast to the beautiful simplicity of St. Luke ! He says nothing as to what the questions were. Will it, then, be wrong in us to hazard a conjecture ? May we not suppose that His questions related to the Messiah, and to the prophecies respecting Him found in the Psalms, Isaiah, and Daniel ? This, surely, was one of the great themes which now began to occupy His deepest thoughts ; and to learn the views of these Rabbis respecting Him of whom Moses in the law, and the Prophets, did write, would, we conceive, be His earnest wish. Nor is there anything incredible in the fact that one so young should thus converse with these learned Rabbis. According to his own account of himself, Josephus was so precocious a youth, that, at the age of fourteen, he was frequently asked by the high priest and principal men of the city his opinion on important points of the law. Is there any difficulty in admitting that Jesus was equally able to reply to the inquiries of these doctors, even though but twelve years of age ?

Here, then, we picture to ourselves this Divine Child sitting in the midst of the Rabbis,

—they on divans or raised couches, He on a little stool, or on the ground. They are all distinguished by the over-garment of pure white linen, with fringes attached, called the Talith; and they have before them several rolls of parchment containing the Pentateuch or some of the Books of the Prophets. Jesus is clad in the ordinary costume worn by boys of His age; and with fixed eye, and beaming countenance, and noble mien, He listens to the conversations of these learned men. And He is with them, not one day only, but a second, and a third; so intent is He on the acquisition of knowledge,—so absorbed is His mind in the questions which He hears discussed.

How His temporal wants were supplied during those three days, we are not informed, nor where He lodged during those two nights: but probably one of these Rabbis would take Him to his house; for, as He had won their high esteem, they would all be disposed to treat Him kindly, and even deem it an honour to receive Him as a guest.

But we must now return to Mary and Joseph. They had appointed the time when they would start on their return to Nazareth, as well as the place of meeting prior to their departure; and they naturally supposed that Jesus would be there accordingly. He was not there, however; but, hearing that another company of their

kinsfolk were already on the way, they doubted not that the Child was with them, and that they should find Him when they encamped in the evening of the day. No blame, then, is to be attached to them for leaving the city without Him. They had the most perfect confidence in His judgment, and they never dreamt but that all was well. But they arrived, in the evening, at the first stage of the journey, probably Nablous; and then, perhaps, they found the tents of the former company already pitched for the night; but, though they sought Him among their kinsfolk and acquaintance, He was nowhere to be seen. What a night of sorrow was that to Mary! And, on the following day, she and Joseph, accompanied perhaps by a few of their friends, hastened back to Jerusalem to seek their treasure, sustained in their anxiety only by the confidence they had in God.

And now, like the bride in the Canticles, Mary goes about the next day, in the city, in the streets, and in broad ways, seeking her Child, and saying to all she meets, "Saw ye Him whom my soul loveth?" At length, after much fruitless search it may be, she hears of a boy who has been seen in the temple and has attracted the attention of many of the Rabbis. Thither she hastens; and there she finds Him, calm, peaceful, and most happy, sitting among these doctors, "both hearing them, and asking them questions."

He rises up as He hears her voice ; and, amazed at what she sees, she accosts Him with the words, "Son, why hast Thou thus dealt with us ? behold, Thy father and I have sought Thee sorrowing."

This is the moment seized by that great painter, Holman Hunt, in his wonderful picture of this event. The artist's ideal of Jesus is not that He was literally "without form or comeliness ;" for he depicts Him as a beautiful boy with a fair complexion, blue eyes, red hair parted in the middle, and a countenance of the most lovely and prepossessing aspect. Such a boy, in all probability, was David His great ancestor ; and Mr. Tristram tells us that he saw a boy in Syria who might have served the painter as a model for this figure. The figure of Mary is equally natural and striking ; and, full of earnestness and tears, she presses forward to imprint a kiss on the cheek of her lost Child, who has just turned towards her, and seems to be uttering the words ascribed to Him. Joseph is behind, but seems almost as anxious and as thoughtful as Mary ; and the figures of the Rabbis, seven in number, together with every other object in the picture, all add to the grandeur and impressiveness of the scene.*

* When I first saw this picture, my attention was riveted for upwards of an hour ; and I left it at last with great reluctance. I have not attempted to give a minute description of it ; for to

As always, so now, Mary is the prominent actor here, not Joseph; and she it is who speaks to Jesus with so much surprise and grief, "Son, why hast Thou thus dealt with us?" she says, "behold, Thy father and I have sought Thee sorrowing." Never before had He caused them the slightest grief; and hence she wonders the more at His conduct now. And she speaks of Joseph as His father; whence we may infer that she had never unfolded to Him the secret of His birth,—never told Him that Joseph was His foster-father only, and that He had no earthly father. "Yet are her words—not, *We, Thy parents*, but, *Thy father and I*—a most exquisitely delicate expression of that sacred secret,"* which she had ever kept within her soul. What is His reply? An apology? An expression of grief? An acknowledgment that He had wrongfully caused them pain? Nothing of the kind. He had never done so hitherto, and they had no ground to conclude that He had done so now. His only reply is, "How is it that ye sought Me? Wist ye not that I must be about My Father's

do that in words would be no ordinary task. The best critique I have seen of it is in *Macmillan's Magazine*, for May, 1860. Since this chapter was written, a beautiful little volume has appeared on the picture and the facts it represents, by the Rev. B. Glover. Hunt & Co.

* Stier's "Words of the Lord Jesus," vol. i., p. 27, Clark. But he adds, "which had almost faded away in her soul." Surely not! How could it?

business?" What a reply! How mysterious and impressive! And these are the first recorded words of the Child Jesus,—the very first utterances of His lips which are written for the instruction of the Church. What was the import of these two questions? They were uttered, doubtless, in the kindest tone, and with no intention whatever to reproach His parent; for, first, He asks, How is it that ye sought Me?—as if He had said, "I was never lost;" and then He adds, Knew ye not that I must be about My Father's business?—that I was sure to be here, in the temple, where ye now see Me?

The Child, then, never thought of anything but this,—that, being in the temple, His parents would be sure to come for Him there, ere they left the city; for doubtless He had been there previously, during the festival, with their knowledge, and had perhaps expressed before His love to the sacred place, and His great reluctance to leave it. Why, then, did they not repair to the temple at once, instead of seeking Him elsewhere? He had not caused their sorrow. Had they but considered who and what He was, they might have been spared their anxiety and grief. And to Mary's *Thy father*, Jesus opposes *My Father*; thus expressing, for the first time, His consciousness of the true relationship in which He stood to God. We can account for the

conduct and language of Jesus on no other ground than His full apprehension of His Divine Sonship; and we have here, on the very threshold of His maturer life, a proof of His Divinity which it is impossible to explain away. The genuineness of the story is evident on the face of it. Who could have invented it? There is nothing mythical about it. It has the air of a simple fact which never could have been told had it not occurred.

But what is the full force of the second question of the Child? The words are, *οὐκ ᾔδειτε ὅτι ἐν τοῖς τοῦ πατρὸς μου δεῖ εἶναί με*? What is meant by the undefined *ἐν τοῖς*? The best rendering would perhaps be, says Alford, "*among My Father's matters,*" which embraces "*all places and employments of My Father's.*" Yes, it behoved Jesus to be about His Father's house, attending to His Father's work, and submitting to His Father's will. The temple was the earthly house of His Father; for though it had been defiled, it was not yet wholly forsaken, and it behoved Jesus to be there. His, doubtless, was the language of the Psalmist, "One thing have I desired of the Lord, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in His temple." Accordingly, in the temple He was found; not admiring its architectural beauties, not wrapped up in its

outward splendour, but occupied about His Father's business,—occupied in hearing and asking questions which bore, more or less directly, on His Father's work. He came, not do His own will, but the will of the Father who had sent Him; and already, even at twelve years of age, He is absorbed in this—lost in this; so that it is His meat and drink to do it, and He is surprised that His friends should not understand Him. “As He Himself had ever, from the beginning, possessed a consciousness of the object of His life, only as yet concealed in His childish capacity; and as this first clear disclosure (to be followed itself by many such, in advancing clearness and assurance) seems to Him at once as natural as if it had never been otherwise than clear to Him: so in like manner does He, in childish confidence, ask His parents Wist ye not then everything concerning Me long since? And assuredly, however much such a saying must have astonished them, there was so much in it that was right and true that they could not but take shame to themselves that they had been troubled about the Son of the Highest,—as if any evil could befall Him before the accomplishment of the mission of His life; that they should have thought it needful to guard Him,—as if, when out of their immediate care, He could possibly stray beyond His Father's *hand, and guidance, and protection.* With this

last meaning, His inquiring word comes round again to the obvious reply which the occasion demanded, and gives the reason of His first question, How is it that ye could seek Me sorrowing? Considered ye not that I am always in My Father's hands and care?"*

"He hath left us an example, that we should tread in His steps." And how beautiful an example is there here, for childhood and for youth, for manhood and for age, of entire devotedness to the will of God! Each of us, in our sphere, should be about our Father's business; and in reading this narrative we may catch something of the spirit in which that business ought to be regarded. But, alas! how cold we are in our Father's business, if, indeed, we attend to it at all! In our own secular affairs we are generally ardent enough; but in the affairs of our Father who is in heaven we are remiss, negligent, or wholly unconcerned. Were Christian professors, like the Child Jesus, thoroughly intent upon the great work which God has called them to do, their influence on the world would be all but irresistible, and the triumphs of Christianity would soon be multiplied a thousand fold.

Mary and Joseph were silent at His reply. They understood not the saying which He spake to them. They knew that He was

* "Stier," vol. i., p. 25: comp. Lange's "Life of Jesus," vol. i., p. 413.

no ordinary Child; but the profound import of His words they could not comprehend. Even Mary, though she had kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart, did not yet understand either the mystery of His person, or the grandeur of His works. Nor is this surprising; for even the angels desire to look into these things, and only in the light of eternity will they be fully revealed and known.

At a later period of His life, Jesus suddenly disappeared from among His friends, and was absent forty days and forty nights in the wilderness of temptation. Milton, in his "*Paradise Regained*," represents His disciples seeking Him, as the young prophets sought the lost Elijah, but in vain. But in the mouth of His mother Mary he puts words expressive of the most troubled thoughts, which are somewhat allayed by the recollection of this memorable event:—

"But where delays He now? some great intent
Conceals Him: when twelve years He scarce had seen,
I lost Him, but so found, as well I saw
He could not lose Himself, but went about
His Father's business; what He meant I mused,
Since understand; much more His absence now
Thus long to some great purpose He obscures.
But I to wait with patience am inured;
My heart hath been a store-house long of things
And sayings laid up, portending strange events."

Though we have no Scriptural warrant for it,

the idea is a fine one ; and it is perfectly natural to suppose that the lessons Mary learnt by the loss and recovery of her Child would be of practical service to her at this and other periods of His mysterious life.



CHAPTER XI.



THE HOLY CHILD SUBJECT TO HIS PARENTS.

ABSORBED in His Father's business, the Holy Child would, probably, have remained much longer in the temple, had not Mary and Joseph gone there to seek Him. He was not weary of the place; for it had greater attractions for Him than any spot on earth; and even now He would have lingered in it, but for the duty which He owed to His earthly parents, under whose care He must, for some time longer, live.

He therefore said no more; but with beautiful submission left the Holy City, "and went down with them, and came to Nazareth, and was subject unto them." (Luke ii. 51.) With what joyous hearts would Mary and Joseph now retrace their steps towards Galilee! Their treasure with them, now more dear than ever, they would think nothing of the toil of travel, but would bound along their path as if inspired with new

life, yet musing, all the while, on the mysterious conduct of the Child. "His mother kept all these sayings in her heart."

But what may we suppose were His emotions now? He had entered upon a new stage of life. His breast was now stored with the grandest and sublimest thoughts. Who He was, and what He was destined to become, were subjects which were constantly occupying His mind. Yet years must elapse ere He could enter on His work,—years of preparation, years of toil, during which He would grow, both in wisdom and in stature, and thus become fitted for His great life-work.

Obedience to parents was one of the solemn injunctions of the Decalogue, and was ever properly deemed by the Jews a vital principle of morality. This duty, then, the Child Jesus would observe, that He might give to all children a pattern for their imitation the most perfect and sublime. Let us go again, then, to Nazareth, and let us there look into the humble home of Joseph and Mary, and contemplate the Holy Child in His lowliness and subjection,—fulfilling their commands, obedient to their will, and delighting in their service.

As we have already observed, Joseph was by trade a carpenter. (Matthew xiii. 55.) Close by his house, then, or forming part of it, would be the little workshop in which he would often be seen with the saw, the hammer, and the adze,

plying his busy task with the greatest industry and care. At first the Child Jesus would only watch him in his employment, as many a carpenter's little son watches his father now; but ere long—after the return from the Holy City—He would be set to work to learn the trade Himself; and we gather from St. Mark's Gospel that He did learn it; for, at a later period, the people said not only, "Is not this the carpenter's son?" but, "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary?"

Jesus, then, worked as an artisan. There was no degradation in this; for the Jews always taught their sons a trade. "What is commanded of a father towards his son?" asks a writer in the Talmud; and the reply is, "To circumcise him, to teach him the law, and to teach him a trade." Yet was it not an act of condescension in Jesus to be thus employed? and did He not thereby give dignity to labour, and greatly ennoble the pursuits of handicraft? Who needs be ashamed of making ploughs and yokes? as Justin Martyr says Jesus did. Or why should the carpenter think meanly of his trade, since it was once the occupation of the Redeemer of the world?

It was said of Jesus before His visit to Jerusalem; that He "grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon Him;" and now it is said that He "increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man." (Luke ii. 40, 52.) "Both these

statements show," as Bishop Ellicott observes, "that the outward and earthly development of our Redeemer was in strict accordance with those laws by which those He came to save pass from childhood into youth, and from youth into mature age."* The subject is a difficult one, and has given rise to much controversy. Jesus was Divine. "In Him dwelt all the fulness of the Godhead bodily," even from the womb. This truth we must ever hold as fundamental to the Christian faith. But in their zeal to maintain it against Arians and Socinians, some have gone so far as to deny that He was truly human; and in the fourth century of the Christian era, Apollinaris made a distinction between the soul, ($\psi\chi\acute{\eta}$), and the informing spirit of man, ($\rho\acute{o}\upsilon\varsigma$), and maintained that Jesus did not possess the latter, but that the "Word" or "Logos" occupied its place.† But "how," said Athanasius in reply, "could Christ represent for us the pattern of the holy life after which we ought to strive, if His nature was not entirely homogeneous with ours? He could not redeem human nature in its completeness, unless He had assumed all the parts of which it consists." The arguments of Athanasius were unanswerable; and yet the influence of this heresy has been felt to the present day. It was revived by Sweden-

* "Historical Lectures," p. 85, 2d edit.

† See "Neander's Church History," vol. iv., p. 119, &c.; and "Bishop Pearson on the Creed," art. v. and Notes.

borg ; and there are many who, whilst they do not profess to hold it, still shrink from the idea that the development of the mind of Jesus was a real and natural development, imagining that if it was He could not have been truly God.

But His growth *in wisdom* is positively affirmed. What then are we to understand by it ? and wherein did it differ, if it differed at all, from the development of the mind of an ordinary child ? Lange replies as follows :—“ If education is looked upon as an influence on the life of the scholar by which his character receives many elements from the circle of ideas and the reflections of his teacher, and by which his views are variously modified, we may unhesitatingly declare of Jesus that His healthy nature totally withstood all education of the kind. Himself so purely and so powerfully original, He was incapable of taking into His nature false or obscure impressions of theology and history. It was only the objective and the actual which could find an entrance into His mind : what was false rebounded from the elasticity of His heavenly-minded moral nature, and then appeared before Him objectively as one of the world’s delusions,—as a medium for perfecting His knowledge of the world. But if we view education as a means of unfolding the inner nature of the scholar by appropriate influences and communications, as the organic excitement of his development, and as feeding his

inner life with such a measure of the facts of the outer world as the exigencies of a healthy vital process of assimilation required, no one enjoyed a richer education and cultivation than Jesus.”*

The inquiry may perhaps be made, Was Jesus brought up in any of the schools of Jewish learning? or was He taught the dogmas of any of the Jewish sects? We have only to glance at what those sects were, to perceive that they could have no direct influence on the development of His mind; and that His nature, which was perfectly pure and sinless, would recoil from most of their conceptions and ideas.

There were the **SADDUCEES**, whose name is generally supposed to have been derived through a line of the priests, from Zadok, a priest of the house of Eleazar, and the eleventh in descent from Aaron. (2 Sam. viii. 17; 1 Chron. vi. 8.) This sect, in opposition to the Pharisees, denied the possession by the Jews of the oral law; the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead, and the existence of angels or spirits. They were, in fact, the free-thinkers of the day, and would, no doubt, have been gratified with many of the views held by sceptics and semi-sceptics of the nineteenth century. Whether Jesus came much in contact with them in His early life, there is no evidence to show; but their notions would be most repulsive to Him, and His mind would shrink

* “Life of Christ,” vol i., p. 415, Clark.

from the very thought of doctrines so derogatory to the character of God, as those they held and taught.

The PHARISEES were a far more numerous sect. They were so called from *Parîshîn*, an Aramaic word, which signifies separated; for they looked upon themselves as the godly men—the saints; and upon all others, even of their own nation, as, in comparison with themselves, vile and sinful. They professed great reverence for the law of Moses; but they made the word of God of no effect through their traditions. (Mark vii. 13.) They paid tithe of mint and anise and cummin, but they neglected the “weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith.” (Matt. xxiii. 23.) Their hypocrisy was unbearable. They stood praying in the streets, that they might be seen of men. They made broad their phylacteries, and enlarged the borders of their garments. With publicans and sinners they would not eat; and no high-caste Brahmin of the East ever looked down upon those whom he thought beneath him with more contempt than did the Pharisee upon the generality of his fellow-men. Most of the doctors with whom Jesus conversed in the temple were of this sect. But He learnt nothing in their school which He did not learn much better elsewhere; and many of their tenets would be as repulsive to His mind as were those of the Sadducees, whilst their practices He

learnt to look upon with abhorrence and disdain. (See Matt. xxiii. 24—34.)*

The **ESSENES** were the third sect of religionists among the Jews, and were, according to Josephus, the ascetics of the age, living a life of obscurity in the desert, to which they retired professedly to give themselves to holy contemplation. They held chiefly the doctrines of the Pharisees; but they were decided fatalists, which the Pharisees were not. They were as self-righteous as others; but their self-righteousness was that, not of casuists, or of rationalists, but of decided stoics. The name *Essene* is derived, by some writers, from a Hebrew word, signifying “seers;” by others from a word which means “the silent, the mysterious;” but it never occurs in the New Testament, nor is the sect ever alluded to by the Sacred Writers. According to Philo, their numbers did not exceed four thousand, and their principal settlements were on the north-west shore of the Dead Sea. To suppose, as some have done, that Jesus had any sympathy with them, or that He was indebted to them for any of the wisdom He possessed, is inconsistent with His whole life and character. Even John the Baptist, as we have already seen, was no Essene; much less was the Lord Jesus; and between Essenism and Christianity there was nothing more in common than was found in Judaism.

* See, for a description of the Pharisees, “Lightfoot’s Works,” vol. iii., pp. 138—403; vol. v., pp. 212—216, &c.

As to the Greek and Roman culture, it had not penetrated into the obscure village of Nazareth. The names of Hesiod and Homer, of Socrates and Plato, were there unknown. Even Philo, the Alexandrian Jew,—a Pharisee in religion, but a Platonist in philosophy,—had never perhaps been heard of in that quiet spot. The dialect spoken by its inhabitants was the Aramaic, or Syro-Chaldaic, which was the vernacular of all Palestine. But as Greek was known by many of the Jews, it is possible, if not probable, that Jesus became acquainted with it. There were schools of the lower class in Nazareth, if not of the higher. The former, Jesus may possibly have attended; but that He did not attend the higher, may be inferred from what the Jews of Jerusalem said of Him on one occasion: "How knoweth this man letters," (*γράμματα*, "Scripture learning,") "having never learned?" (John vii. 15.) "The 'having never learned' had, so to speak, an official meaning, 'Inasmuch as He has never been in our high schools;' for only in these, according to the common opinion of the time, could any real knowledge be obtained."* Very significant, too, was His reply to their remark: "My doctrine is not Mine, but His that sent Me." He came to give to men the words which the Father had given Him. But had He, then, no teachers

* Hengstenberg's "Commentary on St. John's Gospel," vol. i., p. 384.

whatever? Was His development wholly from within? Such an inference by no means follows. There was opened to Him the book of nature. He often roamed the hills of Nazareth; often gazed on the magnificent prospect which presents itself from the Neby Ismail; often plucked the flowers which grew so plentifully on the sides of the hill; and often listened to the bleating of the sheep and the singing of the numerous birds. When he entered on His public ministry, He drew many of His similes from nature,—witness several of His parables and the Sermon on the Mount; and we cannot doubt that when a boy He loved it, and saw in it far more than others saw,—the workmanship of God His Father. He would often look upon the sun shining in his strength, and upon the stars in their beauty, and would sing, with David, “The heavens declare Thy glory, and the firmament showeth Thy handiwork;” and, in the quietude of Nazareth, He would often feel Himself in the midst of His Father’s house,—in the midst of a temple grander far than ever could be raised by the skill of man.

He read the Scriptures, but without the glosses and comments of the Rabbis; and the study of them would be His great delight. In the Books of Moses, in the Psalms of David, and in the prophecies of Isaiah, His mind would frequently be absorbed; and, doubtless, such

Psalms as the second, the eighth, and the twenty-second, and such chapters of Isaiah as the eleventh, the forty-second, and the fifty-third, would penetrate and fill His soul. Perhaps He would sometimes read by the side of Mary His mother; but though she kept all these things and pondered them in her heart, He would soon soar to a height she could not reach, and, like the doctors in the temple, she would be astonished at His understanding and His answers.

Ever after His twelfth year, Jesus would attend the national festivals at Jerusalem; and, on each occasion, the temple would be His chief resort; but whether He again conversed with the Rabbis, as He did at first, we do not know. Of one thing, however, we may be sure. His eyes would be opened to the religious corruptions of the age, and His spirit would be often stirred at the profanations He would witness of His Father's house. He would observe the pride and haughtiness of the Pharisees. He would mark how the influence of the Herodian family was blighting all the prospects of the nation, and preparing it to fall beneath the Roman yoke; and He would perceive to how fearful an extent even the priesthood had gone astray, and were leading the people into a night of impenetrable gloom. Did He never shed a tear over the Holy City during this period of His life? Surely it would be an error to suppose that those eighteen years of His

history were unmarked by sorrow ; and that, until His temptation in the wilderness, He was an entire stranger to trial and suffering. Not only would He be subject to the ordinary griefs of childhood and of youth, but, as His mind expanded, and as He became fully conscious of the moral condition of His people, a burden would fall upon Him which would often weigh down His spirits to the dust.

How would He gain relief from the sorrows that oppressed Him ? He held communion with the Father. As, during the three years of His public ministry, He was wont to retire into the mountains to pray, so we may be sure that, during His earlier years, prayer was His delight, and fellowship with God His highest joy. And, perfectly sinless as He was, how close and intimate would that fellowship be ! how near He would approach to the eternal throne !

Such, then, was the development of the Holy Child. He grew in wisdom and in stature, and in favour with God and man. He grew *in wisdom*. For, as Dr. Thomas Jackson says, "the Divine Nature in Christ no more gave to His human infinite wisdom, than It gave to it infinite strength ;" and he observes very beautifully, "It sufficeth me to believe and know that my Lord was so qualified with all grace, even whilst He lived in the form of a servant, that He was always more ready to understand and comprehend what-

soever it pleased His heavenly Father to impart or signify unto Him, than crystal is to receive the light of the sun, or any glass the shape of bodies which present themselves unto it; and more ready withal to do whatsoever He knew to be His Father's will He should do, than we are to eat when we are hungry, or to drink when we are thirsty. There was in Him, even in His cradle, a docility, or capacity both for learning and doing His Father's will truly, infinite in comparison of other children; yet this capacity was actuated by degrees."* His growth in wisdom, then, was real. He learnt by degrees whatever it was requisite He should know, taught by the Scriptures and by the Spirit of God, until fully fitted to proclaim to others the mysteries which had hitherto been hid.

He grew in *stature*, or *in age*—*ἡλικία*; but of the height and comeliness of His person the Sacred Writers utter not a word. What His external appearance was, they might have told in a few short sentences: but, had they done so, they would merely have satisfied men's curiosity; and, perhaps, they were restrained from doing it, to prevent an idolatrous regard to representations of His person to which any authoritative description of it would, doubtless, have given rise. The pro-consul Lentulus is said to have described

* "Works," vol. vii., p. 280, Oxford edit. Compare the beautiful note of the Rev. R. Watson on Luke ii. 40.

the leading features of our Lord's appearance,* and there is little doubt that the greatest painters have formed their conceptions of Him from that description; but whether it was written by Lentulus, or by any contemporary of his, may be fairly questioned; and hence the grandest portraits of Christ which have ever been produced are ideal only, and, for anything we know, unworthy of Him.

He grew *in favour* with God and man. From the womb He was God's beloved Son; but by His growth in wisdom, His sinless obedience, and His entire devotedness to His Father's will, He became more and more the Object of His complacency and delight. God had never before seen a member of the human family (not even Abraham His friend, or Moses the meekest of mankind, or Jeremiah whom He sanctified from the womb) who was always pleasing in His sight; but in Jesus He saw one who never grieved Him, whom He could not even charge with folly, who was holier and purer in His sight than the angels who minister before His throne. In Him, therefore, He took increasing pleasure, and Jesus as a Child and as a Youth became more and more the Object of His delight and joy. But He grew in favour *with man also*. Yet not with every man; not even with all the inhabitants of

* See Lord Lindsay's "Letters on Christian Art," vol. i., p. 77.

Nazareth. He would often be seen in their synagogue, where they would scarcely fail to mark His fixed attention to the reading of the Scriptures, and the loftiness and purity of His whole demeanour: but some of them would probably be offended with Him even on this very account; for distinguished excellence of any kind is never appreciated by the world, but often misunderstood and despised. The treatment which Christ received when He first presented Himself in the synagogue at Nazareth as a public Teacher, shows that many of the people were at that time unable to comprehend Him; and it is more than probable that there was much that was mysterious to them in His life and character as a boy. But with the truly pious of the town he grew in favour. How would His submission to domestic duties, and His simplicity, gentleness, and child-like love, endear Him to Mary and to Joseph! and how would His invariable kindness to all men, displayed in every word, and look, and gesture, win for Him the regard of all the wise and good! It is as difficult for us to form a just conception of the purity of His life, as it is for one who has never seen it to form a conception of the whiteness of snow. But many of the inhabitants of Nazareth, and especially those who lived within the immediate circle in which Jesus moved, saw Him, at intervals, for many years, and could not but observe that He walked in the

highest paths of holiness, and that neither flaw nor fault could, at any time, be laid to His charge. What hearts must those have had who did not love Him then ! what hearts must those have who do not love Him now !

Yet such there are. Some there are who deny the sinlessness and the purity of His life : there are others who would explain away everything miraculous in His history, and would place that history side by side with the myths of Greece and Rome : and others there are, again, who admit that He was a son of God, but only in the sense in which such men as Cikaya Mouni, Plato, and St. Francis Assisi, were the sons of God ; affirming, at the same time, that He was a thaumaturgist, a mere wonder-worker, who pretended to work miracles, but really did not ! How marvellous are the inconsistencies of the human mind ! To escape from what they call the difficulties of Christianity, men plunge themselves into the difficulties of scepticism and infidelity ; and ere long they find themselves in a labyrinth out of which there is no possibility of escape.

But to return : a question of some interest arises here. What relatives had Jesus ? Of whom did the circle in His Nazareth-home consist ? Many suppose that He had brothers and sisters, the sons and daughters of Joseph and Mary ; and there are certain persons referred to in the New Testament who *appear* to stand

to Him in this relationship. They are first mentioned in Matt. xiii. 55, 56. "Is not this the carpenter's son? is not His mother called Mary? and His brethren, James, and Joses, and Simon, and Judas? and His sisters, are they not all with us?" Elsewhere "His brethren" are spoken of as in company with Mary His mother; (Matt. xii. 46; Mark iii. 31; Luke viii. 19;) and again they are mentioned by St. John, who says, "For neither did His brethren believe in him." (John vii. 5.) Now there are many eminent writers who hold that these persons were really the brethren and sisters of our Lord,—the sons and daughters of Joseph and Mary; and, if this were the case, the family-circle at Nazareth must have consisted, at one time, of at least nine or ten persons. Nor is this by any means incredible; for "the fact is," as Alford observes, "that the two matters, the miraculous conception of the Lord Jesus by the Holy Ghost, and the subsequent virginity of His mother, are ESSENTIALLY and ENTIRELY distinct."* We are not, however, shut up to the adoption of this opinion. By Origen, and many in the Eastern Church, it was supposed that the persons called our Lord's brethren were His half-brothers,—the sons of Joseph by a former marriage; whilst another

* Note on Matt. xiii. 55, Greek Test., where the affirmative view of the case is ably argued. See also Smith's "Dictionary of the Bible," art. "Brother."

opinion, entertained by Papias, and very widely spread, was that they were the sons of Alphæus, or Clopas, and Mary the sister of our Lord's mother, and therefore the cousins of Jesus, though called, after Jewish usage, His brethren. We adopt this latter view, as by far the most probable; for one of these persons was James, who is called by St. Paul "our Lord's brother," and was the first bishop of the Church at Jerusalem; (Gal. i. 19;) and this very James was James the Less, and the brother of Joses, whose mother was Mary the wife of Alphæus. (Mark xv. 40.)* Alphæus and Clopas (Matt. x. 3) were different forms of the same name, and therefore the names of one person.† After the death of Clopas, and that of Joseph, the reputed father of our Lord, which events probably took place before Christ entered on His public ministry, the two sisters may naturally have lived together; and hence it is easy to account for the fact that the sons of the second Mary were frequently in company with their aunt. With them, therefore, Jesus would associate; and two of them, James and Judas,‡ were subsequently among

* See this ably argued by Mill, "Panthæistic Principles," p. 224, &c.; also Smith's "Dictionary," art. "James;" Lange's "Life of Christ," vol. i., p. 421; and Bishop Ellicott's "Lectures," p. 97, note.

† Not, however, the same as Cleopas. (Luke xxiv. 18.)

‡ Identical with Lebbæus. (Matt. x. 3.)

the twelve apostles, (Matt. x. 3; Acts. i. 13,) and the writers of the Epistles which bear their names. The passage in John vii. 5, already mentioned, has been strongly urged against this conclusion; for it is there said, evidently after the choice of the twelve apostles, "Neither did His brethren believe in Him." But this may mean that their faith was immature; or it may refer to the two, Joses and Simon, who were not apostles, though they afterwards became believers. (Acts i. 14.)

How much the Evangelists might have told us of this period of our Lord's life, had the Holy Spirit not imposed on them a restraint! Here, as in many other instances, the omissions of the New Testament are evidential of its inspiration; for it is all but certain that if the Sacred Writers had been left to themselves, they would have been more particular and minute. Was not Mary so restrained from divulging the mystery of the Saviour's birth? He, too, though fully conscious that He was the Messiah, long before He entered on His public ministry, kept the secret in His own breast. Eighteen years elapsed after His first visit to Jerusalem, and during all that time He neither wrought miracles nor preached sermons, but calmly waited until the time should come, when, in accordance with His Father's will, He should show Himself unto Israel, and declare to them that the kingdom of heaven was at hand. Yet those eighteen years

had an important relation to His work and mission. They were years of preparation for His work,—years in which He was “learning obedience by the things which He suffered,” (Heb. v. 8,) and becoming practically acquainted with the trials and temptations of early life, that He might sympathise with us in our youth as well as in our riper years.

From the fact that Joseph is never mentioned by the Evangelists after this period of our Lord’s history, we may naturally infer that he died before its close. Under what circumstances did he die? Who were present on the occasion? Did Mary witness his departure? Did Jesus follow him to the tomb? On these questions, as on many others, the Sacred Writers are profoundly silent. The legends are far more communicative than they: for they tell us that Joseph lived to the age of 111 years, and a festival was assigned to his memory by the Coptic Christians, which was celebrated on the 20th of July. But the legends are worthless, and must be laid aside. Little, however, as is said of Joseph, we may be sure that he was a kind and amiable man; and that, as his end approached, he would say, with the holy Simeon, “Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy word: for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation.”

When he entered into rest, Mary was left as

the only earthly parent of Jesus, and in her house Jesus dwelt; labouring, perhaps, for her support, and subject to her gentle will, until, at thirty years of age, He went from Galilee to Jordan unto John, to be baptized of him, there to be anointed by the Spirit from on high for His great and wondrous work.



CHAPTER XII.



THE PLACE IN HISTORY OF THE HOLY CHILD.

WUCH, as far as we can gather them, are the leading circumstances connected with the birth and early life of the Holy Child Jesus. It remains that we advert, in a few closing pages, to the place which He occupies in the history of the world.

The Incarnation, undertaken for the purposes of redemption, is the grandest of all miracles, the deepest of all mysteries, and the sublimest of all truths; to deny it and retain Christianity, as some are now attempting to do, is absolutely impossible. If Jesus were human only and not Divine, Christianity is only a human work, and must take its place by the side of other human systems, and stand or fall with them. We grant that Judaism was a Divine work; but Moses, the agent by whose instrumentality it was founded, did not profess to be a Divine person, whereas Jesus unquestionably did: moreover, Judaism

was not intended to be permanent, while Christianity is; but permanent it cannot be, if its Founder were not what He declared Himself to be, the Son of God.

We hold, then, that it is essential to our highest hopes, that we believe in the Divinity of the Holy Child Jesus, and, as inseparable from it, in His miraculous conception by the Holy Ghost.

To write a life of Jesus which ignores this first great miracle, as Renan has professed to do, is, therefore, to write a mere romance; and such his book is deemed by some, for it has been printed in Hamburg in combination with a novel! And to trace the biography of Christ from point to point, beginning with the time when He was "a young man of promise, popular with those who knew Him, and appearing to enjoy the Divine favour," as the author of "*Ecce Homo*" has attempted to do, is to lose sight of an essential element in His life and character. Every right view of the history and work of Christ must start from this point,—His true and proper Divinity; and, as necessarily connected with it, His miraculous conception in the womb of the blessed Virgin. Was Jesus Divine, or not Divine? is becoming more and more the question of the age; and, on the answer given to it, every miracle of the New Testament, together with the truth of Christianity, as a whole, depends.

Our reply to it is unhesitating and absolute ; for, if He were not Divine, His life is an enigma, and the grand superstructure of the Christian Church is based upon a foundation which must ultimately give way.

The Holy Child was born into the world "in the fulness of the time"—τὸ πλήρωμα τοῦ χρόνου. (Gal. iv. 4.) Four thousand years elapsed after the first promise respecting the Seed of the woman was given, ere that Seed appeared ; but those four thousand years constituted the era of preparation for the great event.

They embraced the deluge, the call of Abraham, the formation of the Jewish people, the giving of the law, the settlement in the land of Canaan, the captivity in Babylon, and the return ; all which events, with many others, were training the chosen race for the advent of the great Deliverer, by teaching them the need of One greater than Abraham, or Moses, or David, or any of the prophets. During the same period, great events occurred among the nations of the earth also ; such as the successive rise and fall of the Egyptian, Assyrian, and Babylonian empires, —by which men might have learnt, as many doubtless did, that their religion and their philosophy were essentially defective, and could neither keep society permanently together, nor answer the momentous questions relative to man's origin and destiny which continually presented

themselves to thoughtful minds. What the religion of the Gentiles did for mankind is seen in the terrible picture of the heathen world given by St. Paul in the first chapter of the Epistle to the Romans; and all that Judaism could do for the elect people was to preserve them from sinking into the same deep gulf. The condition both of Jews and Gentiles, just prior to the coming of Christ, was most deplorable. Rome was in the ascendant; and by the extent of its victories it had brought under its sway the greater portion of the civilized world: but its poets, its philosophers, its statesmen, and its historian, could tell men nothing of the chief good, whilst crimes the most atrocious, and vices the most abominable, were openly practised, and even gloried in, and formed part of the worship of the gods in the temples erected to their honour. Then as to the Jews, they were divided into sects, torn by factions, and puffed up with arrogance, self-righteousness, and pride. They had been cured, by the captivity in Babylon, of the worship of Baal and of Ashtoreth; but now they had become worshippers of themselves; and though the name of Jehovah was professedly revered among them, His laws were violated, His temple desecrated, and His honour trampled in the dust.

Jesus came, then, just when He was most needed,—just in the midst of a night of gloom

which had settled on the earth, to dispel its darkness, and to bring light, and peace, and joy. He was called by one of the prophets "the Desire of all nations," or "the Beauty of all the heathen;" (Haggai ii. 7;) for not only were many of the chosen race waiting for "the Consolation of Israel," but many among the Gentiles were longing for a Deliverer, and predicting, though unconsciously, His approach. Among the Jews many false Christs made their appearance; and among the Gentiles there was a celebrated man called Apollonius of Tyana, a city of Cappadocia, who was born about the same time as Jesus, and who, on reaching manhood, travelled through the cities of the Græco-Roman world, trying to bring back the people to a purer morality and a better worship of the gods. "We are therefore justified," says M. de Pressensé, "in concluding that humanity had arrived at that point to which it was God's providence to conduct it. The desire for salvation had become purified and defined, through the evolutions of the different mythologies; and the Græco-Roman world had fearful proofs of its own utter incapacity to satisfy it."* *More light! more light!* was the universal cry. Light on the character of God; light on man's relationship to Him; light on the means of pardon and acceptance; light on the passage to the tomb, and on the world beyond

* "The Religions before Christ," p. 118, Clark.

the grave;—this was the craving desire of human spirits, which neither Gentilism nor Judaism could meet.

Moreover, the advent of the Messiah synchronized with the famous prophecy of Daniel concerning the seventy weeks. From the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem unto Messiah the Prince, a period was to elapse of seven weeks of years, and threescore and two weeks, that is, of 483 years; and to His being cut off, or put to death, of seventy weeks, or 490 years.* Now this command was, no doubt, that of Artaxerxes Longimanus, who in the seventh year of his reign gave a letter to Ezra the scribe, permitting him to go and rebuild Jerusalem. (Ezra vii. 1—9.) This was in the month Nisan, B.C. 458 : so that the 483 years would be completed in the same month A.D. 26 ; which, as the Nativity took place four years earlier than our era, “would coincide with John’s baptism, soon after the beginning of which the descent of the Holy Ghost upon our Lord at His baptism manifested Him to be *the anointed with the Holy Ghost, the Christ.*”

“Salvation is of the Jews.” Only from that people could the Messiah spring ; only in the land they occupied could He be born. To them

* See “Daniel the Prophet,” by Dr. Pusey, p. 170, etc. A word of explanation is perhaps necessary. The 483 years consist

were "committed the oracles of God," (Rom. iii. 2,)—to them pertained "the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises." (Rom. ix. 4, 5.) From them, therefore, must Christ come "who is over all, God blessed for ever." It is remarkable how, through all the vicissitudes to which they were subject, the promise given to Abraham, that in his Seed all the nations of the earth should be blessed, was remembered; and how providentially the genealogical tables of the tribes and families were preserved, so that it could ultimately be shown that the Messiah had descended from Abraham, through the line of Isaac, Judah, and David, and that He was therefore the rightful Heir to the throne of the house of Israel. But the Omniscient Eye was watching all events, and the Omnipotent Hand was guiding them to the issue, so that not one word of the promises failed to be fulfilled.

But whilst Jesus was by birth a Jew, He was more,—He was *a man*, related to the whole brotherhood of men: whence St. Luke traces his descent from Adam, the great progenitor of $7+62\times 7=483$; and by adding one week of years, viz., 7 years, we get the 490 years. In the midst of this one week of 7 years the daily sacrifice was virtually to cease; (Dan. ix. 27;) for then the Messiah was Himself to become the sacrifice: (ver. 24:) and this gives a period of about $3\frac{1}{2}$ years for our Lord's public ministry, which is the time usually assigned to it.

mankind. It is a remarkable fact that in His genealogical tree the names of two Gentile mothers are found,—Rahab the harlot, and Ruth the Moabitess; so that His descent was not purely Jewish, but possessed, also, a Gentile element. He stands as the Head and Representative of the human family; and wherever man is found,—in the city or in the forest, in the palace or in the wigwam, in the tropics or at the poles,—he may call Jesus his Friend and Brother, and, flying to Him for refuge, he will meet with sympathy and help.

Not less important was it that the Messiah should be born in the Holy Land. There were Jews in Egypt and elsewhere; but His birth-place must needs be in the country which God had selected, ages before, as the inheritance of the chosen race. That selection was not an arbitrary one. “When the Most High divided to the nations their inheritance, when He separated the sons of Adam, He set the bounds of the people according to the number of the tribes of Israel.” (Deut. xxxii. 8.) The distribution, that is, of the nations of the earth was the work of Divine providence and arrangement, and “God so determined the boundaries of the nations that Israel might receive as its inheritance a land proportioned to its numbers.” Why was Canaan, in particular, chosen as their inheritance? Because both its position and

character fitted it to become their home. "It represents," says Lange, "the essential peculiarities of the earth in the smallest space, and within the smallest frame: hence it has become the beloved, the 'precious,' land, the land that speaks to man's heart, the land by which man has learnt to appreciate the beauty of the whole earth." There is a very close connection between the physical features of a country, and the character of the people who possess it. The latter is greatly modified by the former; a fact to which we ourselves, the inhabitants of the British Isles, bear witness. Now the land of Canaan was specially suited for the training of a people who were to be God's witnesses to the world; and there, accordingly, the Jews were placed, "in that fortress of the mountains which was set in the midst of the world's highway, on the desert-bridge between the homes of the mightiest peoples, across which all the world's pilgrims and traders must pass, but where a brave and pious people might hold their own against the most powerful."*

Only in that land, then, could the Christ be born; only there could He be trained; only there could He train others; only there could He teach, and labour, and suffer, and die. It has been said that every man's life is a plan of God; and, doubt-

* "Hulsean Lectures" for 1865, by the Rev. J. Moorhouse, M.A.

less, the life of Jesus was ; for all the circumstances connected with it—the precise period of His birth, the people and the family from which He sprang, the place of His nativity, and the little town where He was brought up—were determined in the counsels of the Eternal Mind, and that before the creation of the world. Nor did He frustrate any of the Divine designs. No other man ever fully acted upon and carried out his life-plan ; but the Man Christ Jesus never deviated from it, but in childhood, youth, and manhood went about His Father's business, and did His Father's will, more perfectly than the seraph who bows before His throne. His life-plan was gradually developed to His mind ; and as He saw God's purposes respecting Him, He entered into them with the utmost readiness, and did not thwart them in the least degree. That He was sinless, He Himself testified,—nor could His enemies disprove it : and hence He never prayed for pardon from the commencement to the close of His career ; but said with confidence to His Father, "I have glorified Thee on the earth : I have finished the work which Thou gavest Me to do."

The place in history, then, of the Holy Child is that of the second Head of humanity, and the Saviour of the world. He is the One Person who brings life and blessing to mankind,—His is the One Name in which alone we can trust,

“neither is there salvation in any other.” As men gather round His manger, and there learn of Him humility; and as they gather round His cross, and there rely on Him as the sacrifice for sin; they are brought into fellowship with God, they begin to live a new and nobler life, and they become prepared for that immortal blessedness which is in reserve for them in heaven. The mystery of the Incarnation and the mystery of the Cross are united, and we cannot reject either without rejecting both. But in accepting both, Jesus becomes to us the All in all; and not prophets, not apostles, not martyrs, not the blessed Virgin, must be allowed to come between us and Him; but to Him only we must repair, and through Him only can we obtain eternal life.

“The Dayspring from on high hath come
To light whoe’er in darkness strays,
To chase the shadows of the tomb,
And guide our feet in peaceful ways.

“The Sun of Righteousness hath risen
With healing in His radiant wings;
He shines into the soul’s dark prison,
And hope in hearts despairing springs.”

St. Paul, in his Epistle to the Romans, takes a survey of the necessity and nature of the plan of human salvation; and, having done so, he concludes with words which we may well adopt: —“O the depth of the riches both of the

wisdom and knowledge of God ! how unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out ! For who hath known the mind of the Lord ? or who hath been His counsellor ? Or who hath first given to Him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again ? For of Him, and through Him, and to Him, are all things : to whom be glory for ever. Amen."



INDEX.



	PAGE.
Abraham	27
Alford, Dean, quoted	121, 152, 190, 211
Angel-choir, The	91
Angels	1, 84, 91
Anna, The prophetess	118
Annunciation, The	1—10
Apollinaris	198
Apollonius of Tyana	220
Archelaus	157, 178
Asking questions	183
Augustus Cæsar	61
Barzillai	58
Bethlehem-Ephratah	44, 69
Bir-David, or David's fountain	57
Birthday, John's (B.C. 5)	31
Boaz	50
Book of nature	204
Brethren of Jesus	210
Cæsarea	62
Carpenter, Joseph the	197
Cave, The traditional	73
Character of the Child	83
Chimham, Khan of	58, 70
Christ All in all	226
Church of the Nativity	72
Clopas or Alphæus	215
Comfort in sorrow	153
Conception of Mary	9
Cyrenius or Quirinus	65
Daniel's seventy weeks	221
Date of Christ's birth	77
David	53
Death of Herod	155
Decree of Augustus	63
Desire of all nations	220
Divinity of Jesus	75
Dixon, Hepworth, referred to	70

INDEX.

229

PAGE.

Dorner, Dr., quoted	76
Dreams of Joseph	17, 139, 158, 161
East, The.	119
Egypt	141
Elizabeth	10
Ellicott, Bishop, quoted	78, 123, 198, 212
Epiphany, Feast of	133
Essenes	41, 202
Fairbairn, Dr., referred to	3
Festivals, Jewish	175
Forerunner, The	21
Frankincense	129
Fulness of time	218
Gabriel	1, 26
Galilee, Province of	163
Genealogies of Christ	3
Gentiles	87, 219
Glad tidings	87
Gold	129
Gospels, Spurious	142, 171, 184
Government of Syria	65
Greek culture	203
Growth of Jesus	199, 207, 208
Harvey, Lord A., quoted	3
Hebron	52
Hengstenberg, referred to	7, 45, 75, 164, 203
Herod the Great	61, 125, 147, 155
Holiness of Jesus	173
Holman Hunt's picture	187
Hosea, Prophecy of	143
House of Bread	59
Hymns, The three	19
Immanuel	6
Incarnation, Importance of	216
Infancy of Jesus	171
Jackson, Dr. Thomas, quoted	122, 154, 206
Jacob	46
Jahn's Antiquities, quoted	32
Jebb, Bishop, referred to	13
Jerusalem	175
Jesus, The Name	6, 101
Jesse	53
Jewish Schools	201, 203

	PAGE.
Jews and Gentiles	37
John the Baptist	31
Jones on the Canon	142, 171
Joseph	17, 139, 158, 214
Josephus, referred to	24, 64, 148, 156, 161, 179
Journey to Jerusalem	175
Juta or Juttah	10
King, Christ a	89
Lange, Dr., referred to	12, 24, 80, 101, 199
Legends	135
Lentulus	207
Life-plan of Jesus	224
Lightfoot, Dr., referred to	15, 23, 29, 102, 176, 202
Lindsay, Lord, referred to	208
Magi	118
Magian religion	128
Mary, Silence of	15
Mary, Sister of	212
Mary, Song of	12
Mary, Thoughts of	95, 198
Michael	1
Mill, Dr., quoted	19, 97, 123, 153, 212
Milton, quoted	193
Mother's love	151
My Father's house	190
Myrrh	130
Nativity, Date of the	77
Nazarene	165
Nazareth	2, 166, 195
Nazarite	26, 164
Neander, referred to	198
Neby Ismael	204
Obed	53
Obedience to parents	196
Offering incense	24
Omission	218
Oosterzee, referred to	90, 115
Paschal Feast	181
Pharisees	201
Philo, quoted	41
Pigeons	105
Pilgrims	177

	PAGE.
Popery	13
Portraits of Christ	208
Prayer	206
Preachers, the first	93
Priests, Duty of	22
Pressensé, M. de, quoted	220
Quesnel, quoted	77
Quirinus (Cyrenius)	65
Rachel	151
Rachel, Sepulchre of	48
Recall from Egypt	159
Religion of Brahma	75
Retribution	149
Robinson's Researches, quoted	10, 45, 53, 169
Ruth and Naomi	48
Sadducees	200
Samaritans	69
Samuel	54
Shepherds	80
Silence of Mary	15
Simeon	107
Sin offering	106
Sinlessness of Jesus	208, 225
Song of Mary	12
Song of Simeon	109, 111
Song of Zacharias	34
Stanley, Dean, quoted	48, 51, 73
Star in the East	121
Sychar	68
Temples of Jerusalem	62, 179
Turtle-doves	105
Vishnu	76
Watson, Rev. R., referred to	207
Westcott, referred to	66, 117
Wieseler, quoted	78, 120
Worship of the Child	128
Youth of Jesus	208
Zacharias	21
Zend religion	118
Zorobabel	165
Zumpt, referred to	65

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